

komorebi

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Rating:

Mature

Archive Warning:

Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Category:

Gen

Fandom:

僕のヒーローアカデミア | Boku no Hero Academia | My Hero Academia

Relationships:

Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead & Shinsou Hitoshi, Kurogiri & Shinsou Hitoshi, League of Villains & Shinsou Hitoshi

Characters:

Shinsou Hitoshi, Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead, Nedzu (My Hero Academia), Kurogiri (My Hero Academia), League of Villains (My Hero Academia)

Additional Tags:

Ensemble Cast, Canon Compliant, Mystery, Traitor Theory, Undercover Missions, basically Shinsou is tasked with finding out who the traitor is, and he gets in way over his head, Action/Adventure, Angst, Canon-Typical Violence, Dadzawa, Student & Mentor Relationship, Aizawa loves his purple son, well maybe not at first but he'll get there, criminal activity, Gangs, Underage Drinking, Recreational Drug Use, Gun Violence, Child Abuse, Implied/Referenced Human Experimentation, Torture, Moral Ambiguity, Hero/Villain Politics

Language:

English

Collections:

BNHA Gen Gems, Best of My Hero Academia, Creative Chaos Discord Recs, Character Driven My Hero Academia, escapism (to forget that the world is a burning hellscape), favs favs favs, stuff i really really like, Quality Fics, Can't wait to update, to be read boku

no hero fics, MHA works that make me happy this site exists, My heart is full, Willow's absolute favorites 💖💖💖, The Best of BNHA Fics for Picky Readers, Canon Divergent AUs, Bnha Bookclub Discord Recs, Nix's Faves *chef's kiss*, My Sweet Boi Shinsou, brilliant and innovative favs, AMAZING IM IN LOVE, my bnha beloveds 🦋, Nicee, Top Tier Reads To Munch On, Fics that make me feel something, Behold the Sacred Texts, 🧠 A Reading List Made By A Total Ass (with good taste) mostly Mha probably... I know I have such a way with words 📖, food for the soul, just some incredible bnha ff, Worth It BNHA Fanfics Reading List - Ongoing, Eyebags For Days, krakengirl's top tier favs of all time, my hero fics I would die for, Purple_Collection, Deserted_Island_Fics, Fics I Need to Read

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by [Calamitatum](#)

Summary

The change can't be immediate, or it'll seem forced. It has to take time, in order to be realistic. He knows that.

He'll need to seem like a villain. But he'll be a *hero*.

And for that, Hitoshi thinks he'd do just about anything.

Or,

Someone's selling UA's secrets, and Shinsou Hitoshi definitely doesn't have anything to prove.

Notes

I feel like there's not enough love for my son and boy Shinsou in this fandom, and with his (somewhat) recent resurgence in the manga, I figured it was finally time to start posting this big dumb fic that I've been working on for literally forever.

I first began planning this fic in October of 2017. In the moment of its inception, my decision on the UA traitor's identity was based off of my genuine suspicion that said person would be revealed as the traitor in canon.

EDIT: I do not follow the Vigilante manga spin-off and this story will not be compliant with anything revealed therein.

Additionally, this story is only canon compliant up to about Chapter 97. The Provisional License Exam arc and the Eight Precepts of Death arc will be addressed, but handled differently, in accordance with the events of this story. From that point on, I'm more or less going off the rails.

Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

An Honourable Mention

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Part 1

Student

Japan's Top 10 Most Villainous Quirks

Check out our picks for some of the scariest quirks to hit the scene in recent years!

Posted on www.QuirkBlog.jp at 10:47AM on August 31

The article is nothing special. More a fluff piece than anything, and clearly scraped together last-minute. Yet somehow, whether through the miracle of good timing or a favourable internet algorithm, it gets 10 thousand hits in the first hour, and doubles twice by the end of the day. The next morning, it's trending on a dozen social media platforms.

In its few hours of limelight, until its inevitable collapse beneath an ever-growing stockpile of new content, it reaches a surprising width. And in that time, for at least a moment, it captures the attention of a few notable people.

One of whom just so happens to be the first person it mentions.

Villainous Quirk Number 1: Warp Gate

This powerful quirk has been made infamous in recent years by its user, the self-titled Kurogiri, rumoured to be the second-in-command of, you guessed it, the League of Villains! This quirk has thwarted multiple attempts by law enforcement and Pro Heroes to capture members of the League, helping them to remain an ever-present threat! Wow!

Kurogiri skims the headline, clicks on it more out of boredom than any real interest, while waiting for Tomura to calm down from his latest tantrum. His lips twitch and his chest puffs a fraction, when he sees his own name emblazoned across the screen. First place, is it?

He scrolls idly down the list. Tomura, he notes, is only third.

Kurogiri closes the page and stifles his bemusement. Probably best not to let him see.

Villainous Quirk Number 2: Bloodcurdle

This eerie quirk was used by notorious hero-killer, Chizome Akaguro! But you'll know him better as Stain, a villain who rose to fame this summer when an online video circulated preaching his anti-hero and anti-villain rhetoric! Even after his arrest by then-Number 2 Hero Endeavor, Stain's reputation has continued to grow! And so has his following! How scary!

Toshinori clicks on the article by accident. Phone screens these days, honestly - does everything have to be so small? He squints, and chuckles when he realizes his mistake.

But the humour is quickly lost. His eyes narrow at the exaggerated title, outlandish descriptions and over-zealous use of exclamation points. *It's called clickbait*, Midoriya told him once, with an indifferent shrug.

Toshinori is far from indifferent. These villains are dangerous. People are hurt because of them. People are *dead* because of them. This is

nothing to joke about.

He closes the page without reading it.

Number 3 is Shigaraki Tomura. Number 4 is a vigilante who calls herself Skullcrusher. The list goes on, naming only the most popular villains, the ones to have been in the spotlight or under recent media scrutiny. Names people will recognize, that will get them talking. There's no hard-hitting analysis, no research having gone into it at all.

Still, it's a good way to pass the time, on the train between Saitama and Musutafu.

Which is why Shinsou Hitoshi actually reads it all the way through.

At first, he's not even really paying attention. He's got one earbud in, foot tapping on beat. The other listens for his stop, too crowded onboard to gauge his location through the window. The train rattles around him, and he has to readjust his grip on the overhead bar or risk falling.

He's not even really paying attention.

Until suddenly, he is.

At the bottom of the page, under the heading *Honourable Mentions*.

Villainous Quirk Number 11: Brainwashing

This frightening quirk belongs to UA student Shinsou Hitoshi, who had his first public appearance last spring during the nationally-televised UA Sports Festival! Although not technically a villain, Shinsou's quirk still makes us shiver! Just think what a villain with a Brainwashing quirk could make you do!

His heart drops, ice-cold and sinking. Sorrow *shame* rage, lightning-quick. His hand slips from the bar and he stumbles on a turn, the whirl of the tracks like a deafening drum, earbud falling to dangle limp around his neck. He stares at his name until the screen goes dark.

A pleasant voice announces the stop, and wrenches himself from his thoughts, lets his body get swept up in the throng of elbows and schoolbags.

On the sidewalk, he stands in the blistering sun and squints up at his misery, his victory, his greatest achievement and biggest regret, the first step towards his lifelong dream and his own personal glass ceiling.

He takes a deep breath, and walks through the front gates of UA High School.

There is, in fact, one other notable person who makes it to the end of the article.

Nedzu clicks it out of nothing more than amusement – a bizarre, near-morbid sense of curiosity to know more after seeing such a *ridiculous* title. He knows before even reading the first line the writing promises to be of poor quality, the rankings lacking in sense, and the experience of reading it altogether unpleasant.

And he's entirely right in his suspicions, distaste growing stronger the further he skims. Still, as he reaches the bottom, his eyes flicker, then pause. Then widen.

Shinsou Hitoshi. He stares at the name – familiar and yet altogether unexpected, and his expression turns from curious to thoughtful.

Then, to a smile.

The day passes like any other.

If not for the new course schedule, Hitoshi would be hard pressed to

tell his second term at UA apart from his first. Maybe there's a sort of buzz about the school—students with gaits a half a step more eager than usual, teachers with jittery hands from drinking one too many cups of coffee—but it passes him over unaffected. He carries his mood around like a physical weight – another warning sign on the glaring *loner* attitude he already unwillingly projects, but he can't help it.

He can't stop thinking about that stupid fucking article.

The windows are open in Homeroom. A warm, late-summer breeze wafts through the class. Hitoshi sits at his desk with his earbuds blaring to block out the squeak of chairs on linoleum and chattering classmates. A few of the braver ones shoot him grins, which Hitoshi returns as unawkwardly as possible. No one mentions the article, but then, why would they? It's not like it said anything particularly shocking.

He's a beat late standing when Maijima enters the room, a beat late in the class-wide chorus of, "Good morning, sensei!" and in fact, soon finds himself a beat behind *everything* that day. He's distracted throughout Homeroom, then again in Modern Lit. He flubs two questions in Maths—his best subject—and another yet in Global Politics. During lunch, Midoriya Izuku catches his eye and gives a wave, and though since the Sports Festival the sight is usually accompanied by a bitter twinge in his stomach, Hitoshi reluctantly waves back.

But mostly, the day passes like any other.

He picks at his lunch, stumbles through Phys Ed, nearly falls asleep in History, flicks his pencil and watches it roll across his desk, always teetering on the edge, never falling.

When the bell finally rings at 3:30, he lets himself get jostled in the crowd as it filters through the halls, weary feet carrying him to his locker. Outside, the sun cooks the pavement, bright enough to hurt, and he squints as he shuffles across the parking lot.

"USJ, here we come!"

Next to the gates, Class 1-A cheers as a shuttle bus pulls to a stop. A few shout, elbows shoving for access to the door.

"Not too loud," someone jokes. "Don't let the League of Villains hear you."

An uneasy laugh ripples the crowd. It's quickly followed by Iida Tenya's unmistakeable voice.

"No pushing. Kirishima, back of the line. Let's act like the respectable heroes we are. We don't want to embarrass ourselves in front of our sensei."

"Too late," a tired voice drawls.

The students laugh again, this time in earnest, and begin to pile onto the bus. Hitoshi watches them all go, something heavy and tight in his chest. By the time he realizes he's staring, there's only one person left.

Shouta Aizawa raises a single eyebrow in his direction, expression inscrutable. Hitoshi cringes, ducking away. *Great*. Like he wasn't already creepy enough.

He keeps walking, gaze down, and doesn't let himself look up again until he's through the gate, until the bus pulls off down the street. He chances a final glance to watch it go.

With a sigh, he turns the other way.

That night, he cooks dinner alone. Almond vegetable curry, Mom's favourite. He leaves a plate in the oven for whenever she gets home. He rushes his homework, leaves the pages gray with smudges, wrinkled where he's dragged the eraser too hard. He plays the new Smash Heroes until his thumbs are numb from hitting the controls and the glare of the screen in the dark grows just this side of painful. Hours later, he lays wide awake in bed, stares at the flickering streetlamps through the window and tries not to wonder how late training at USJ went, how exhausted the 1-A students must be, lying in their own beds now. What it feels like. What it felt like, just to be there.

He eventually manages the feat of sleep, after a few restless hours of tossing and turning. But not before he gives in and finally checks the *QuirkBlog* article one more time.

51,000 hits. 2,000 shares. Comments at the bottom now too. The top one reads, *ok no offense but the honourable mention guy is creepy as hell*.

Wont be surprised to see his name in the news in a few years, probly for sticking up a 7/11 or smthn

He turns off his phone.

It's 8:10AM on the second day of the term, and Aizawa Shouta has a Homeroom to plan in 15 minutes, but when his phone flashes with a text from Nedzu—*My office?*—he unzips himself from his sleeping bag with only mild resignation and lets it sag to the floor. Distantly, he hopes he won't be back before the students, that the crumpled bag will scare them, heaped in the corner of the class. With any luck, they'll think he's still in it, ignoring them. Or better yet, dead.

In his office, Nedzu looks entirely too enthusiastic for this to be anything resembling a normal visit. Shouta can already feel the headache coming on.

"Excellent, excellent! Thank you for coming. I hope I haven't disrupted anything." He sits at his desk in his usual chair, raised enough that he can see over it. Eye contact, he'd told Shouta once, is important when speaking to humans. It makes them feel more at ease, or in Nedzu's particular case, more like they're speaking to another intelligent creature.

"Not at all," he says placidly.

"Excellent," Nedzu says again. "Please close the door."

Shouta does, then sits when Nedzu gestures to the chair across from him. It all seems perfectly formal, right up until Nedzu tips forward and crawls across his desk to sit directly in front of him.

Shouta leans back, startled. Nedzu has always prided on composing himself as anthropomorphically as possible.

Nedzu beckons him closer, leans in as though to share a secret, and says, "How much do you know about Shinsou Hitoshi?"

Over the next week, Shouta learns *a lot* about Shinsou Hitoshi.

Born July 1, in Saitama Prefecture. Attended Hideyori Middle School before being admitted into UA's General Education stream after failing the Hero Course Entrance Exam. Lives at 2597 Kawa Street, apartment 404. Mild allergy to asparagus. Only one emergency contact.

Brainwashing Quirk, developed late, age six, and misdiagnosed twice. Shinsou isn't part of a single after-school club. He's a smart kid, but struggles to apply himself – B's across the board.

Shouta learns all of this from his student file. The rest, he learns while tailing him.

Shinsou usually takes the train to school, but will walk if the weather is nice. Shinsou's mother is a surgeon at Saitama General Hospital, and on Thursdays, Shinsou works in the backrooms, sometimes washing linens, sometimes helping organize files. Every morning, Shinsou drinks a large iced coffee from the bakery in front of the train station, even on cold days, and always tips. He sometimes stops to pet the stray cats that live in the back alley, and has an entire notebook page dedicated to surprisingly detailed sketches of them.

All in all, not the most exciting tail Shouta's ever followed. His weekends, though, are the most boring of all. Shinsou stays home, almost invariably.

Shouta learns something else that week too. It is very, very hard to stay on top of grading papers when you have a tail to follow seven days a week.

"This is ridiculous," he says on Monday morning, dropping two stacks of ungraded—and, if the amount of spelling errors he's already spotted are to be believed, *unedited*—essays on Nedzu's desk. "You want A to M or N to Z?"

Nedzu doesn't look up. "Come again?"

"Pick a pile," Shouta says. "Because you're grading. It's the least you could do. I'm behind on my progress reports thanks to your *special assignment*."

This gets Nedzu's attention. His eyes go wide over the top of the laptop. "The door," he hisses, waving Shouta back.

Shouta rolls his eyes but closes the door with a swift kick. He sinks into the chair, steals a pen from the jar on Nedzu's desk, and drags

over the second stack of essays. Nedzu can have A to M. There's more of them anyway.

"What did he do yesterday?"

Nedzu's been asking this question every day for a week. The answer has yet to change.

"Absolutely nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"You're sure?"

Shouta huffs. He's not Musutafu's premier underground hero for nothing. "I'm sure."

Nedzu looks *delighted*. He uncaps a pen and snatches the first essay in his pile, eyeing it over for only a second before hatching it with X's almost gleefully.

Shouta stares. "Are you going to tell me what this is all about?"

Nedzu taps the pen against his chin. "Well, I'm afraid Mr. Aoyama has entirely missed the point of the government's decision to delay the Hero Payment Regulation Plan—"

"Not that," Shouta cuts in. "Shinsou. Why am—Why am I *following* him?"

Nedzu lowers the essay. "Because I trust you."

Shouta stifles a sigh. Nedzu may be a genius, but there's no denying he's got a flare for the dramatic. He waits.

"I trust you very much, Aizawa. I trust that you are a good teacher, and more importantly, a good person, who wants only the best for our students, our school, and our society as a whole."

"Okay."

"I used to feel that way about all of my staff," Nedzu continues. "I used to be as proud of them as I am of each and every one of my many students. However, I have recently been forced to reconsider this trust."

“...Okay.”

Nedzu’s gaze shifts, eyes dark and impossible to read. He leans in, like he did last week. This time, Shouta leans too.

“We were taken by surprise by the League of Villains *thrice* last semester. The first, at USJ, placed our students’ lives in jeopardy, and *you* yourself were almost killed. After that, I vowed to take whatever measures necessary to ensure the safety of our school and the integrity of its mission. But then another student was attacked at Kiyashi Ward, and another *abducted* shortly after, over spring break.”

Shouta doesn’t really need the recap. He *was* there, after all.

“That’s when I realized my measures had not been extreme enough. I realized not only had I failed, but I had been *blind*. Blind to an obvious and terrifying truth.”

He fixes Shouta with a heavy look, and with all the austerity he can seem to muster, says, “There is a traitor among us, here at UA. Undoubtedly, invariably. I’ve had my suspicions for a while, but now I am afraid it is a reality I can no longer ignore. They are working for the League of Villains, selling them our plans, our whereabouts, our secrets, our weaknesses.”

At last, there’s a pause, and Shouta realizes he’s expected to say something. Nedzu probably wants some sort of outburst – confusion, perhaps denial, but Shouta only nods. It all adds up. In fact, it all makes a *frightening* amount of sense. And whatever Nedzu’s plan is—because Nedzu *always* has a plan—he’s more than ready to play his part. Anything to keep the students safe.

He just doesn’t see what this has to do with the question he asked.

“Okay.”

Nedzu frowns. “Do you understand where I’m going with this?”

“Not really.”

“Shinsou Hitoshi,” Nedzu says, arms spread like this is some grand reveal, some sort of lightbulb moment.

The light remains dim. “Is the traitor?”

“Not at all!” The arms drop. “You said yourself, he does absolutely

nothing.”

Alright, enough is enough. Shouta was willing to play along at first, but damn it, now he really *is* lost.

“It’s simple, really,” Nedzu says at last. “Shinsou Hitoshi enrolled in our school because he wanted to become a hero, did he not? Well, you and I are about to offer him that chance.”

The bell rings on Monday afternoon and Hitoshi’s already itching to be home. He hangs behind the crowd as it filters out into the hall and tries not to let the agitation shown on his face when Nishihara Namika sequesters him into discussing their upcoming group project. It’s not even due for another week, but Nishihara is the class rep, and always likes to be on top of things like this.

“Just send me your part of the report before Friday, okay?”

Hitoshi nods. “Yeah.”

“Perfect!” Her fingers dance across the screen of her phone and Hitoshi feels a vibration in his pocket. A text reminder. Great. “There was something else I wanted to ask,” she adds before he can sneak off. “And, well, this might be kind of weird, but you draw, don’t you?”

He scratches his neck. “Uh.” It’s not really a talent worth boasting about – he didn’t know anyone knew. “I mean, yeah, sometimes.”

“Would you mind doing the graphs for the project too? I’ll send you all the data and everything. It’s just, sensei always gives extra marks when things look pretty,” she laughs.

Pretty graphs don’t exactly strike him as something worth awarding points, and he can think of about five apps that will plot the graphs for them automatically, but Hitoshi doesn’t voice any of this. “Yeah,” he says instead. “Shouldn’t be a problem.”

Nishihara flashes a dazzling smile. “Thanks, Shinsou! I gotta get to photography club now, but I’ll talk to you tomorrow, okay?”

“Sure thing.”

He gives a small wave as she takes off down the hall, then turns the other way. He shouldn't complain - he's glad to be in her group. Nishihara's always been polite to him. Friendly, even. Which was more than most of Class 1-C, before the Sports Festival. Things have taken an upwards turn since then, with almost the whole class at the very least openly tolerant of him now. There's still the occasional whisper – a few pairs of eyes that don't always meet his, a few voices that still hesitate before responding.

But, well. He thinks of a name, at the bottom of a long list of other, much scarier names, and sighs. Who can blame them?

The halls have grown quiet by the time he reaches the shoe lockers. He hefts his backpack and debates leaving a few textbooks behind, mentally cataloguing which assignments he can put off tonight, and nearly startles out of his skin when a raspy voice speaks from behind.

“Shinsou Hitoshi?”

He flinches. “Fu—” And freezes.

Aizawa Shouta, Homeroom teacher of Class 1-A, stands not five feet away, bloodshot eyes narrowed like they're staring straight through him.

“—uuuyes?”

Aizawa's gaze lingers a frankly uncomfortable length of time. Hitoshi shifts his feet, adjusts the grip on his backpack. “Did you need something? Uh. Sir?”

Whatever Aizawa's looking for, Hitoshi has no idea if he finds it. After another moment, he simply nods once and turns on his heel. “Follow me.”

As though under the influence of his own quirk, Hitoshi rockets forward at the command. His brain scrambles to keep up. “Okay.” And then, “Um. Where are we going?”

Aizawa keeps walking. He turns a corner. Then another.

“Sir?”

If anything, he speeds up.

Hitoshi frowns, but keeps pace, curiosity and the inherent desire to

please the Hero Course homeroom teacher winning out over his annoyance.

Aizawa leads the way to the second floor. As they approach the door to Class 1-A, for one single, glorious, *idiotic* second, his heart leaps. But they pass without pause, and Hitoshi swallows the feeling. *Idiot*, he schools himself. You were crushed at the Sports Festival. You lost your chance. Be realistic.

That's when he realizes where they actually *are* going. His steps falter.

Aizawa pauses with a hand on the door. The Principal's office.

"Am I in trouble?"

Aizawa shakes his head, but his expression is still impossible to decipher. "Come on."

Hitoshi doesn't move.

Aizawa sighs. "You're not in trouble. Now come on."

Hitoshi nods. He's not in trouble. He schools his face into something approaching neutral. He's not in trouble. Be realistic, they're not going to expel you because of some dumb article, *be realistic*—

In Principal Nedzu's office, the blinds are slanted against the afternoon sun, casting the room into a harsh glow under the fluorescents. The large desk in the center is imposingly neat – pens in colour-coordinated holders, stacks of folders organized shortest to tallest, their corners lined up evenly with the desk.

Behind which, sits Principal Nedzu.

"Good afternoon, Shinsou," he says pleasantly. He might be smiling, but it's hard to tell with his features. He beckons towards a chair, and Shinsou sits. Aizawa enters behind him and closes the door with a definitive *click*.

"Good afternoon." Hitoshi goes for a mild tone. He's not quite sure he makes it.

"Is your second term here at UA treating you well so far?" Nedzu asks.

"Yes, thank you."

They continue like that for a moment. Back and forth, pointless

jabber, and Hitoshi feels his earlier anxiety settle. It's a little awkward, with his backpack keeping him from settling comfortably in the chair, his outdoor shoes still on and tracking dirt. He shifts, trying to get a look around. There's a second chair, but Aizawa seems keen to stand over his shoulder instead.

"Now, Shinsou," Nedzu says, and something about his tone snaps Hitoshi back to attention. "I'm sure you're wondering why it is I've asked to speak with you today."

There's a pause.

"Yes, sir," he says, a beat late. He thought it was a rhetorical question.

Nedzu's eyes crease with a smile. "I'd like to offer you a job."

"A—A job?" Hitoshi blinks, and, well, he doesn't know what he was expecting, but it certainly wasn't *that*.

"Before I can describe the job, I must be clear that this is in no way a school assignment. There is no punishment, academic or otherwise, for failing or even choosing not to accept."

Hitoshi takes a minute to let his brain catch up. "Okay..."

"Now, for this next part, I must request *extreme* discretion," Nedzu continues. "Offering you this position is not, strictly speaking, legal." He leans in. "And yet, I truly believe you are best qualified for it."

It takes longer than it probably should to parse the words, but when he finally does, Hitoshi feels his eyes grow wide.

Oh. *Oh*.

"Is this, like, a hero thing?"

He flushes the second the words leave his lips. *Shit*. Way to sound like an overeager kid.

But Nedzu only breathes out a laugh. "Yes, Shinsou. This is, like, a hero thing."

He almost doesn't believe it. He looks around, at Nedzu, grinning in excitement, at Aizawa, still stoned-faced behind them. There's no way this is a joke, right? These are professionals – they wouldn't do something like that.

No. These are *professionals*. As in, *pro heroes*. And they want to offer *him* a *job*? He'd pinch himself if it wouldn't make him look like even more of a dumbass.

He turns back to Nedzu, shoulders set. "I'll do it."

Chapter End Notes

Quirkblog is *absolutely* the bnha-verse equivalent of Buzzfeed and yes it gave Nedzu his idea to hire Shinsou HE'S A GENIUS
OKAY???

Sort of Like a Secret Agent

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The next day, Hitoshi steps through the front gate of UA as though stepping out of his old life and into a new one.

It's almost dizzying how clean the break feels – yesterday like a distant memory in the sun-drenched purpose of *today*. The skies are bright and clear, the wind sharp with an early autumn chill that sweeps across campus behind him, a push at his back to quicken his steps. Yesterday, he was a student. Today, he's—well, Nedzu didn't exactly give him a title, but Hitoshi's taken to thinking of himself as sort of like a secret agent. The thought has him biting back a smile, a deep breath to cool his nerves. It's only been a day, but somehow, it feels like everything's changed.

"You're in no way obligated to accept," Nedzu had told him yesterday. And, "I completely understand if you should choose not to." And, "This mission will likely be long and challenging. It might take months to make even the slightest progress."

"I'll do it," Hitoshi said, for what must have been the hundredth time. "It doesn't matter. I accept. I'll do it."

Their conversation went long into the afternoon, until the sun slanting through the blinds of Nedzu's office turned sunset-pink with the hour. But gone was Hitoshi's earlier agitation to be home, as Nedzu laid out the details and walked him through every step of the plan.

A spy at UA. A traitor, working for the League of Villains. Even now, his head reels to think it. That a pro hero could betray their sacred duty, or that an aspiring student could turn sides when already *so close* to achieving the job of a lifetime – it was almost incomprehensible.

"The goal of the mission is simple," Nedzu explained. "Convince the traitor—whoever they may be—to reach out to you, to attempt to recruit you into the League. Once they reveal themselves, you will play along, bleed them for any information you can, then immediately report their identity back to either Aizawa or me."

According to Nedzu, Aizawa was in place to help guide Hitoshi for however long the mission would take. What form this help was to take

wasn't entirely clear, but he didn't question it. Aizawa, for his part, stayed for the entire meeting, a stone-faced sentry over Hitoshi's shoulder, never once speaking a single word. Even now, he swears he can still feel the heavy weight of a disapproving stare burrowing into the back of his head. Part of him—a quiet, bitter voice in back of his mind—wonders if Aizawa was there just to erase his quirk, to make sure he couldn't get up to anything *villainous*. He dismisses the thought before it can take root. Surely the Principal wouldn't have asked Hitoshi's help if he couldn't trust him to sit through a single meeting without doing something terrible, right?

Hitoshi doesn't look for Aizawa or Nedzu as he makes his way through the halls into class. According to Nedzu's plan, he and Aizawa are to meet once a week—in secret, as not to arouse suspicion anywhere that the traitor might see. Starting today, Hitoshi isn't for any purpose to be seen interacting with either of them. It's one of the many requirements of his *new identity*.

It's kind of like starting at a new school, he thinks. That's essentially what he is now – a new student, a new person, a new Shinsou Hitoshi. One who isolates himself, one who speaks out and starts trouble, one who's angry and bitter and openly resentful of the heroes who've dismissed him his whole life. One who could attract the attention of the League of Villains. One they might try to make join them.

"It won't be easy," Nedzu had said. "It will mean having to play your part all day, every day, for however long it may take, without breaking character." His voice took a softer tone. "It will mean having to isolate yourself from your classmates and friends."

"I understand," Hitoshi said. And he did. He *does*.

He'll need to seem like a villain. It won't be that hard.

The change can't be immediate, otherwise it'll seem forced, and for that, Hitoshi's a little glad. Despite not having many friends, he still cringes to think of strolling up to class one day acting like the world's biggest jackass with absolutely no warning. It can't be that sudden. It has to take time. He knows that.

He'll need to *seem* like a villain. But he'll *be* a hero.

And for that, Hitoshi thinks he'd do just about anything.

He takes it slow the first few days.

He's quieter than usual in class. He slouches at his desk, rolls his eyes at long-winded lectures and flicks through his phone during work periods. In History, during a lesson on the evolution of court cases against villains, he outright scoffs.

"The shift from federal to regional jurisdiction was in response to outcry from local pro unions," Kayama explains from her podium. Pens scratch furiously against their notebooks, but Hitoshi hasn't even touched his. "The unions argued federal punishments ought to be harsher for villains than for average criminals, and that pro heroes themselves should have more say in deciding those punishments."

Hitoshi laughs under his breath, just loud enough to travel to the front of the room.

"Something you'd like to add, Shinsou?"

He smirks, spits out "No ma'am," like it's almost an insult in itself.

Kayama fixes him with a hard look, before eventually turning away to continue the lecture.

Hitoshi takes his first steps into delinquency slowly. He stops returning the smiles and waves sent his way every morning, avoids his classmates in the halls. Once, when he's feeling particularly brave, he even shoves a few aside when they block the classroom exit. Unsure what else to do, he takes cue from Bakugou Katsuki in 1-A.

"Get off my dick," he hears him shout on Friday, voice unmistakeable even across the cafeteria. "Stop telling me what to eat, *dumbass*."

Later that day, Hitoshi slams his locker with a Bakugou-inspired level of aggression and hides a grin when it earns the attention of a few students nearby.

"What's with him?" Yoshimatsu Tashiro whispers to a friend.

"Mind your own business, *dumbass*," he growls as he elbows past.

Mission success, he tells himself. And if Yoshimatsu's eyes widen in hurt, well. That's part of the mission too.

The weekend is a much-needed reprieve. Hitoshi's acting job doesn't extend to home, so he's safe to laze about the house and be his usual self around mom. And honestly? Thank *god*. She might *actually* kill him if he took the same tone with her that he's used with his teachers all week.

It's a quiet Saturday in the Shinsou household – that strange part of day that's not *technically* morning anymore, but Hitoshi's only just dragged himself from bed. Mom raises an eye at his severe case of bedhead when he finally stumbles into the kitchen, checks the clock, and drawls out, "Well, thank you for finally joining us, sleeping beauty."

Hitoshi manages something resembling a greeting, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

She stands from the table to join him in the kitchen. "Hey, are those my slippers?"

"No-oooo," he lies, and gropes around on the counter for his mug, only to releases a thankful sigh when mom grabs one and fills it for him.

She refills her own mug—tea lukewarm now from the pot that's been sitting on the stove all morning, but hey, Hitoshi's not complaining—and they drink in amicable silence. Mom leans against the counter and flicks through the newspaper. Hitoshi waits for his toast to pop.

"Got a lot of work to do this weekend?" she asks.

"A bit," he lies again. It's not that he doesn't *have* any, it's just that he's not really supposed to *do* it. Not properly anyway. Nedzu was very specific in his requirements.

"If the traitor is a teacher, slipping grades and a lack of effort in class will help to send a clear sign of your disinterest here at UA."

This, of all things, actually gave him pause. Bad grades were the fastest way to make sure he'd never be promoted to the Hero Course. That, and mom would probably kick his ass.

Sensing his hesitation, Nedzu was quick to assuage him. "Of course, I won't allow this performance to affect the actual grades in your

student records. Those will be based off of supplementary work provided at Jōshubi.”

Jōshubi Cram School was a thirty-minute walk from UA – a crowded, unassuming thing nestled between columns of rented-out office space, marked only by a small sign on the front door. Nedzu had chosen it for its specialization in personalized lessons and independent work, and, most importantly, because no other UA students were in attendance.

“There shouldn’t be any need to play your role here. You can focus on your lessons with as much enthusiasm as you otherwise would have at UA.”

“Yes, sir,” Hitoshi said. It made sense to provide him with a safe environment in which to actually learn, now that he wasn’t to be doing so at UA. He essentially wasn’t even a real UA student anymore. Not in any way that mattered. It was more like workplace now – he had a job to do.

“I wouldn’t be doing my part if I didn’t continue to provide you the best education possible in these difficult circumstances,” Nedzu said. “It’s the least I could do, especially considering all that you’ll be doing for us.”

That filled Hitoshi with a singing warmth. He feels it even now, the tingle of anticipation in his fingertips, pride like a swell of air in his chest. He takes a long sip of his tea just to hide the smile.

“You want take-out tonight?” mom asks. “I can get something on my way home.”

Just like that, the moment breaks. “Wait, you’re working today? Isn’t this, like, the third weekend in a row?”

She frowns. “I told you yesterday, kiddo. I’m supervising our new transfer’s pre-ops.” She pats his arm, but there’s a weight in her voice that wasn’t there a second ago. “A few hours of quiet will be good. Plenty of time to get all your homework done, yeah?”

“Yeah, sure,” he says quickly. The toast finally pops and he busies himself buttering it before he can see the guilt in her eyes, hoping she’ll drop the conversation. He knows she feels bad about the long hours, but he’s not ten anymore. He gets it. He doesn’t mind. Really.

“By the way,” he says, just to change the topic. “I can’t do Thursdays

anymore.”

“What’s that?”

“Thursdays. At the hospital. I can’t work them anymore, because of cram school.” He chances a glance back up.

She’s frowning again, fingers drumming the counter. “Right,” she says slowly. “Walk me through that again. You’re doing cram school why?”

Hitoshi shrugs. “I don’t know, it’s just... part of this new program they’re doing at school. They’re paying for it and everything.”

“And it’s not because your marks are falling?”

He shakes his head. “A bunch of us are doing it. Like, the whole class, basically.”

Her fingers finally still, lips pressed tight. Hitoshi holds his breath. A clump butter slips from the knife and splatters the counter.

“It’s because the curriculum is so hero-centric,” he blurts. “They’re trying to make sure the Gen Ed kids have more balanced lessons. It’s cool. I mean, it’ll probably be useful when I graduate without any hero experience.”

Her expression melts into something pained. “Oh, honey, don’t say that.”

He shrugs again. Mission success. “I’m just being realistic.”

Cram school goes like this.

Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, after school lets out, he makes the 30-minute trek across town for two hours of supplementary lessons at Jōshubi. It’s pretty boring, at first, but as Hitoshi slips more and more behind his lessons at UA, he’s invigorated to do what he can to catch up, and pours himself into his lessons where it’s safe to do so. He takes the train home—another 45 minutes—and manages to wring out a few more hours of brain power while he pours over the supplementary work provided and graded by Aizawa, usually collapsing into bed some time after 10.

Friday is a blessing. Friday, he has off.

But Thursday is what *really* gets him excited.

He makes the same walk to Jōshubi after school, this time in runners and an indiscriminate track shirt, careful to keep his steps even, his posture loose. At 4:30, he walks in, slipping through a throng of other, equally reluctant students, then waits in a bathroom stall until the halls quiet. He takes the stairwell up three flights, to a floor that's been rented out to some marketing company, crosses a dark room of empty cubicles, then a walkway connecting this building to the next. There, he takes another two flights, a few twisting halls, and finally, stops in front of a set of tall glass doors. They're closed with blinds pulled tight, but the lights inside are on, indicative of the single occupant. A rented communal gym might not be the cool, clandestine meeting place of Hitoshi's fantasies, but to Nedzu's credit, it's certainly not easy to find.

The journey leaves him winded, and grinning like a *maniac*. Secret agent indeed.

Hitoshi sucks in a deep breath, pulse too loud in the empty hall. He wipes sweaty palms on the thighs of his pants and wills his fluttering stomach still. He checks his phone, one last time—4:40 on the dot—and finally, he opens the door.

Shouta exits the train three blocks away, then walks with his hood up and his head low until he reaches the gym. He's about fifteen minutes early.

Inside, he drops a small duffle bag in the corner of the room, rolls up his sleeves and ties back his hair. It's pretty big, for an office gym – walls lined with expensive-looking workout equipment, a padded judo mat in the center. He makes sure the blinds are drawn tight before he flicks on the lights. It's probably an unnecessary precaution – they're five stories up in a sea of empty office buildings. Plus, nobody will be watching Shinsou that closely yet. Still, it's best to get into the habit.

Shouta doesn't know how long Nedzu expects this all to go on, or how long before the kid gets tired of playing his part—effectively throwing his social life away—and wants out. How long before this convoluted

plan finally—if *ever*—works. Nedzu *is* brilliant, that much is sure, and Shouta knows he wouldn't risk this plan if he didn't honestly believe it could work. It's not the logistics he's concerned about though.

It's the kid.

Prior to last week, Shouta didn't know the first thing about Shinsou Hitoshi, and frankly isn't sure Nedzu did either. Which was why he was so surprised—and admittedly, hesitant—about his role in all of this. This plan all hinges on him and he's—well.

He's just a kid. Not even a Hero Course kid. Just a regular kid.

Still, Nedzu seemed adamant. And Shinsou seemed *eager*, to say the least. He wants to be a hero. But of course he does – he's a UA student.

Shouta sighs. He may not know much about Shinsou Hitoshi, but he *does* know a thing or two about training would-be heroes. That's what he's here for, after all.

So when the door clicks open at 4:40 and a nervous-looking Shinsou peers into the room, Shouta wordlessly beckons him forward. He stands with arms folded, expression as cold as though facing a new semester's class, ever ready to put over-eager teens in their places.

"Um, good afternoon," Shinsou says.

Shouta gives him a long look and barely stifles a sigh. Might as well get this over with.

"To know your own limits is the most rational way to know your foundations as a hero," he recites. "So. The Quirk Assessment Test."

"5.8!"

Hitoshi's slams face-first into a padded wall and Aizawa clicks his timer to a stop.

"Is that good?" he gasps. His ears ring from the impact. The first one had been 5.9, but Aizawa made him do it again because he slowed down before hitting the wall.

“For 30 meters?” Aizawa doesn’t even look up. “No.”

“Oh.” Hitoshi deflates, the pound of his heart embarrassingly loud.

Aizawa’s already talked him through a number of exercises—sustained sideways jumps, toe-touches, sit-ups, a grip-strength test—all with the same bland voice and the most severely unimpressed expression Hitoshi’s ever had the misery to have directed his way. And despite all that, he still can’t for the life of him figure out what the hell any of this has to do with assessing his quirk.

In fact, he’s starting to question the whole damn thing. Nedzu had promised these secret meetings with Aizawa would provide him some sort of “guidance,” but all he’s been guided to do so far is run full tilt into a wall.

“As I’m sure you know, Eraserhead was an underground hero for most of his career. Even today, he’s deployed in mostly covert operations,” Nedzu had said. “You also both have noncombative quirks. Therefore, he is well equipped to teach you both how to better use your quirk, and how to rely on other strategies in situations that require them.”

They were the words Hitoshi had been waiting to hear his whole life. He was to be trained to use his quirk—really, actually *trained*—one-on-one, and by a *pro hero* at that.

But now they’re over half-an-hour in, and Aizawa has hardly said more than a few words. Hitoshi is breathless and sweaty and starting to develop a nasty headache, and he hasn’t yet once gotten to use his quirk. He’s not exactly upset about the latter – he’s never really been a huge fan of using his quirk in the first place, given how negative the reactions tend to be. And he’s never even *considered* the implications of using it on a teacher, let alone on a *hero*. Still, he wishes Aizawa would at least *say* something. So far, it’s just like during the meeting in Nedzu’s office – stoney-faced silence. At first, Hitoshi had just thought he was disappointed in the test results. Now, he’s starting to wonder if he just *always* looks like that.

As though Hitoshi just declared his doubts out loud, Aizawa’s eyes harden, near sinister. He snaps his fingers and beckons Hitoshi over, then gestures to a nearby treadmill.

“Next up: endurance run.”

The results of the Assessment Test are, by all measures, deplorable. Shinsou looks like the kind of kid who's never dreamed of higher than a B in Phys Ed.

And frankly, the whole thing's a waste of time.

The gym is only so big – he had to cut the 50-meter dash down to 30. They couldn't even *do* the softball throw, for obvious reasons. Shouta's got him on the treadmill now for the endurance run, but obviously, with a set speed, it doesn't really count.

But Shouta's not doing this because he wants to assess Shinsou's physical state. Not really. He wants to assess his character.

There's something about Shinsou that he still can't quite place. The kid is obviously eager to please – he's done everything so far with no hesitation, even at Shouta's harsh tone and clipped words. He's been on the treadmill for upwards of 30 minutes—and is clearly *miserable*—but he hasn't said a word, still waiting for permission to stop.

Just like in Nedzu's office, he's jumped in head first, ready to do whatever they ask of him. That's not always a good thing, though. He hadn't even asked Nedzu any *questions* before agreeing to the mission. It's a level of enthusiasm that nears on irresponsible. Shouta's seen this type of behaviour a million times, in nearly every one of his students. It reminds him of Shinsou's performance at the Sports Festival. He must have known using his quirk on his fellow students like that wasn't going to win him their good favour. But he did it anyway, throwing himself into it with everything he had, because he'd seen an opportunity to get what he truly wanted, what every student at UA truly wants. To be a hero.

What else?

That's what Shouta keeps asking himself. What else is there to this kid?

That's why he runs the Assessment Test. That's why he keeps Shinsou on the treadmill as long as he does – long after it's been made clear he's got endurance for *shit*. Because he wants to see what else.

Shinsou's quiet, but straightforward. Stoic without being shy. He reminds Shouta a bit of himself in that sense. He's polite, sure, but he somehow manages to say everything with just a hint of attitude. Never

enough to doubt his sincerity, but enough that it's clear when he'd rather be saying something else. All things considered, he seems like a perfectly average teenager. Just that. Average.

What did Nedzu see in him, Shouta wonders. What else?

When Aizawa finally, *finally* lets him off, Hitoshi's nearly slips on his own sweat. His legs fold like paper cranes beneath him, his throat is as parched as—well, as someone who's been running for an *entire hour straight*.

He guzzles down a full bottle, the water like a balm directly on his soul, and it's all he can do not to crumple against the wall. Aizawa watches him, and Hitoshi knows he's glaring back – he can't *help* it. Was an *hour* really necessary? *Really?*

He finishes the bottle and tosses it back into his bag. Sweat drips off the end of his nose and pools in his socks, which—gross. *An hour*. But he wipes his face with the back of his hand, straightens with no small amount of effort, and faces Aizawa's narrowed gaze at last. "What's next?"

"That's it."

Wait, seriously? Hitoshi feels the glare return in full force. He'd been hoping for at least *some* small amount of approval. Hell, even just something in Aizawa's expression to let him know he doesn't see him as *entirely* pathetic.

But Aizawa's not even *looking* at him anymore, already busy wiping down the treadmill and pushing the equipment back into place.

"That's *it*?" The words slip out before he can stop himself, but Aizawa hardly pauses.

"It's 6:10," he says. "That gives you time to get cleaned up and change, then get back down to Jōshubi as classes are leaving." Finally, he looks up. "Following the schedule is important, otherwise you begin to stand out. Also, next time, wear your uniform and change when you get here. You hardly look like a cram school student wearing... that."

“But—But—” Shinsou looks on the verge of a fit. He’s clearly struggling to keep himself composed. Struggling and *failing*. “You didn’t teach me anything! You’re supposed to help me!”

Shouta keeps his face neutral. But inside, he’s grinning. *There* it is.

Shinsou’s teeth are clenched, brows low. Not quite angry, but definitely upset. *So your little dream of training with the pros didn’t exactly work out like you’d planned, huh?* Tough luck, kid.

He cocks his head, fixes Shinsou with a bored look and says, “I did. Just now.”

Shinsou’s shoulders ease a fraction, the question in his eyes, and Shouta takes pity. “I told you to follow the schedule and wear your uniform. That’s helping. Any questions?”

Shinsou holds his gaze for another second, then drops it. “No, sir.” He doesn’t quite spit the words, but it’s a close thing.

Shouta nods toward the bathrooms. “Go get changed.”

He wipes down the rest of the equipment while Shinsou’s in the bathroom. Next time, he’ll make the kid do it himself. But tonight, he’s worked enough.

He’s got his duffle bag packed, already slung over one shoulder, by the time Shinsou reappears. He’s in his UA uniform again. It must have been stashed in his backpack – now a wrinkled mess, tie loose around his neck. He looks exhausted, face drawn and buttons only partially done-up. He’s even still got the runners.

“Like that,” Shouta says.

“What?”

“Wear your uniform just like that. It’s how all the delinquents are dressing these days.”

There’s a beat. The ghost of a smile. Shinsou nods and manages a, “Thank you,” that sounds like he might even mean it.

“Next week, then.”

Shinsou wants to say more, that much is clear, but compliance quickly wins the war over impulsiveness. He nods. “Next week.”

Distantly, Shouta’s impressed. Take your losses, pack away your disenchantment for fixing later, and get on with your damn job. It’s a lesson some of his own students still desperately need to learn. Alright, so there might be something to this kid after all.

Shouta watches him go, then hits the lights and follows him out.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the warm response to the first chapter!

Some notes:

I decided to include Hitoshi's mom as an OC of relative importance in this fic even though I tend to shy away from OCs in general because in outlining the plot, I realized I was in desperate need of some female rep. Some basic info: her name is Dr. Shinsou Haru, and she is a pediatric general doctor and single mother with an emotion-manipulation quirk. None of this is important, I just wanted you to know because I love her.

I don't speak Japanese and didn't want to butcher my attempt at honorifics so we're going to stick with Mr./Mrs., Sir/Ma'am, and the occasional Sensei.

This fic is going to be LONG as HELL. I'm estimating somewhere between 100-150k. I have almost all of it outlined and a solid chunk of it written, but please do buckle in, because it's going to be a bumpy ride.

A Terrible Liar

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hitoshi does, in fact, start wearing his uniform as Aizawa suggested. He shows up late to classes and doesn't apologize, doesn't so much as duck his head in a bow. He slouches in his seat and doesn't follow along in lectures, turns in half-finished homework or turns in nothing at all. He plays his part, and he plays it *well*.

The second week of the mission rolls in, and for all the glares he earns when he shoves his way through the halls, Hitoshi's hardly stepped an inch closer to finding the traitor. Still, he knows he's on the right track when, on Monday, Maijima beckons him forward after Homeroom. It doesn't take a genius to guess it won't be to award him any medals. Still, his expression is open and kind

"Shinsou, I've been meaning to ask, is everything alright? You've seemed a little off, this past week."

Hitoshi shrugs. "Yeah, I'm fine."

Maijima doesn't look convinced. "If there's something going on at home—"

"There isn't."

Maijima blinks. "Alright, but... I want you to know, if there's anything I can do—"

Hitoshi cuts him off. "Can I go now?"

He's expecting anger, but Maijima only looks surprised. He nods, apparently sated for the time, and Hitoshi quickly slips away. It's not the kind of behaviour he'll be able to get away with for long – it doesn't exactly incur sympathy. Maijima will lose patience with him sooner or later. Hitoshi's throat tightens at the thought, but he swallows it down with an ease that's rapidly becoming well-practiced.

He gets his first real test later, when Nishihara catches him in the hall at the start of lunch. He's taken to spending the period outside, or, on colder days like today, in the corner of some stairwell or another. It's either that, or sitting alone in the cafeteria.

“Shinsou, wait up!” Her voice floats down the hall, and Hitoshi freezes before he can think better.

“You never sent me those diagrams for the project,” she says. “I need them before tomorrow – that’s when I’m getting everything printed.”

She’s juggling an armful of books, shifting idly from one foot to another. The passing students cut a wide circle around them, gazes averted. Hitoshi drops his eyes too, and hopes the guilt doesn’t show.

“Find someone else.”

She stills. “What?”

“I said find someone else. I’m not doing it.”

He chances a glance at her face. Her eyes are wide in astonishment.

“Yoshimatsu and Yashiro are doing the write-up,” she says, slow and even. “And I’m doing the presentation. Shinsou, you have to do *something* or—”

“I don’t have to do *shit*,” he cuts in. His voice carries. The circle widens. “Find someone else to do your stupid fucking diagrams.”

In the end, Hitoshi spends lunch period outside anyway. He buries his hands in his pockets and lets the wind cut like a razor through his jacket and tries not to think about the concern in Maijima’s face, the flash of hurt in Nishihara’s. The way it morphed to anger.

On Thursday, Hitoshi’s quick to Jōshubi. He catches his breath in the bathroom, then steels himself for the long trek upwards to the gym. Outside the doors, he pauses again, schools himself into something more presentable than last week’s pathetic first impression.

As it turns out, he needn’t have bothered.

Aizawa's cross-legged on the floor inside, slouched like he couldn't even be bothered to raise his head if not for the wall supporting it behind him. Hitoshi freezes at the bizarre sight, but Aizawa beckons him forward.

"Should I change?"

"Not necessary." Aizawa pats the ground. "Sit."

Hitoshi does, with slight hesitation, a careful foot of distance between them. They sit in silence while Aizawa studies him, and Hitoshi, slightly more familiar now with this behaviour, doesn't shrink from the gaze.

"How's school?"

"Um." He blinks. "It's good, sensei."

"Look at me."

"I—What?"

"You're a terrible liar, you know that?" Aizawa drawls. "You drop eye contact every time."

His lips part, then close. He hadn't noticed.

"Try again. How's school?"

Gaze even this time, he repeats his assurance. "It's going well."

Aizawa holds the stare. "And the cram lessons? Are they helping you stay on top of everything?" His voice is clinical, almost bored.

"Yes, sensei."

"How is it at UA? Having any difficulties so far?"

Hitoshi thinks of Nishihara's glare on his back of his head in class, of the tense silence that now seems to follow him around the halls, of Maijima's hand on his shoulder when he pulled him aside again this morning. *You realize I have to give you an F on this assignment, don't you? It was supposed to be a group project, Shinsou. What happened?*

He's playing his part, that's what happened. He's being a hero.

"It's alright. I'm doing what I can. But I haven't heard anything yet."

Um. From the traitor.”

Aizawa seems satisfied. “Nedzu wants you to tone it up in the halls. Cause a scene – something to get people talking. We need word of your behaviour to spread, in case the traitor's from another department or an older year.”

Hitoshi chews on this for a second. “Does—Does he want me to get in a fight?” He can already imagine the outcome. Starting a fight in a school full of kids with hero quirks would be *asking* to get his ass kicked.

“Nothing physical,” Aizawa says. “Or over the top.”

Hitoshi nods, relieved, then raises his eyes when he realizes he’s dropped them again. “Okay, I’ll figure something out.”

Bizarrely, this doesn’t seem to be the reaction Aizawa was expecting. When he speaks next, his voice is a fraction softer. “Shinsou, how’s it really going at school?”

“It’s good, sensei.” Hitoshi gives a small smile. “Really.”

Aizawa still doesn’t look convinced, but he doesn’t press. Instead, he changes the subject entirely. “You need to run.”

It’s like pulling a plug – Hitoshi’s vigor drains away in seconds. “Again?” He eyes the treadmill with no small trepidation. His legs ached for *days* last time.

“Not now. Just in general,” Aizawa says, to tremendous relief. He leans over to drag his duffel bag near, rummages around until he emerges with a sheet of paper.

It’s a map of Saitama Prefecture – Hitoshi’s neighbourhood, to be exact. There’s a thin red line traced through the streets, marking a path that circles his apartment.

“You need to run this route. Pick a time close to dark—early morning or late at night—and do it every day, on schedule. No breaks, no deviations. Don’t talk to anyone or bring anyone with you.”

Hitoshi squints at the page and nearly balks. “This is five kilometres.”

A breath of laughter escapes Aizawa, and Hitoshi feels his face heat up. “I mean—I just—I’ve never run that much before,” he mumbles.

"I'm very aware," Aizawa says dryly. "But this is important. Nedzu worries the traitor won't be comfortable reaching out to you at school. Too many people, too many things that could go wrong. They'll want somewhere more discreet." He taps a finger along the red line. "They'll probably watch you for a while before making contact, and this will provide a convenient location, a path they'll know you take every day."

Hitoshi has to fight back a groan. "*Every* day?"

Aizawa's face does something strange, like the stutter of a smile, wry and unimpressed. "Something wrong?" But the voice is different. Almost—teasing.

Hitoshi doesn't dare tease back. Knowing him, he'd have misread the whole situation and would just look like even *more* of an idiot. "No, sensei."

"Just run, kid," Aizawa smirks. "Trust me. You need it, if you really want to be a hero."

"I do." Hitoshi all but falls over himself to get the words out. "I do." He tucks the map into his backpack. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Aizawa's mouth twists, the smirk gone. He holds out a hand. "Now, show me some of that cram work."

The rest of the session passes like this, he and Aizawa crowded over a pile of loose paper on the gym floor. Aizawa flips through his work and makes generous corrections, sometimes explaining where Hitoshi went wrong, other times leaving it to him to figure out alone. At random, he dots the conversation with additional suggestions.

"Don't fidget when you're acting out. Remember, you're resentful. Angry. Stand your ground."

"Yes, sensei."

"Don't isolate yourself too much. Spend at least a few lunch periods in the cafeteria. The traitor needs to *see* you alone."

"I will, sensei."

"Don't cross anyone out. Classmates, upper-years, even your own teachers. Nedzu's sure the traitor could be *anyone*."

Nedzu's sure it could be anyone – and he chose *Hitoshi* to find them. To be UA's hero.

"I understand, sensei."

Hitoshi goes to the cafeteria on Friday, as per Aizawa's suggestion. He takes what used to be his usual seat at Class 1-C's unofficial table, though he's sure to get there early to spare others the embarrassment of wanting to leave after he joins. Aizawa said the traitor needs to see him alone. Well. Hitoshi picks at his tray—the only one at the otherwise empty table—and hopes they're enjoying the view.

No one tries to join him for lunch – not that day, or any other. No one so much as *looks* his way. His classmates dance around him in the halls and avoid eye contact in Homeroom. No one waves hello in the mornings anymore.

Hitoshi's never exactly been a social butterfly. Even his closest classmates were always just that: classmates. Not even really *friends*. Still, it—it hurts, in a distant sort of way, to see how quickly they all turn their backs. The worst part is, he can't even really blame them. He'd turn his back too, if someone was acting like as colossal of a dick as he is. Still, some part of him was hoping one or two of them might try to stick it out.

The day passes. He drags his feet between periods, music blaring from his earbuds as he stashes an armful of textbooks into his locker. When he's done, he turns only to find a crowd of students blocking his way – mostly 1-B. They pay him no mind, all gathered around Monoma Neito's phone and laughing at something on the screen.

"Excuse me," Hitoshi says before he remembers himself. No one looks up.

He takes a deep breath.

"Move it! Some of us are actually trying to get to class here."

Monoma lifts his head, eyebrow raised, then lowers it again, unbothered. He says something and his friends all laugh, but Hitoshi can't hear what over the roar of the music.

“Hey jackass!” His fists curl. “I said *move!*”

The crowd does shift this time – a few flinch at his tone. But Monoma steps between them, and suddenly all Hitoshi can see is his too-wide smile. The music lulls and—

“Why don’t you *make me?* You’ve got the quirk for it, don’t you?”

His breath stutters. His hands twist into Monoma’s shirt, whose eyes go wide, mouth open in silent shock before Hitoshi *shoves* and sends him sprawling backwards at the feet of his friends. It happens in the space between one beat and the next, and when music returns it’s *deafening*. Hitoshi tears the earbuds from his ears and just in time to catch the chorus of gasps that erupt all around him.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck *fuck*. Panic and shame twist in his gut. Nothing physical. Aizawa said nothing physical. What kind of *hero* would—

But Monoma is already back on his feet, spitfire and rage. “What the *fuck*, Shinsou? What’s your problem?” His friends stand at his back, defiant. People are staring.

Whatever it takes. A hero would do whatever it takes.

“Get the hell out of my way next time!” Loud loud loud. Let the whole hall hear. Let the whole *school* hear. “Just because you’re in the *Hero Course* doesn’t mean you get to stand in front of the rest of us, asshole.”

He turns quick, so he doesn’t have to see their expressions or catch the flurry of whispers. He’s down the hall in a few strides when Monoma snaps back, but Hitoshi’s already got his earbuds in, heart pounding over the drums.

There’s no cram school that night.

Hitoshi’s awake well past midnight, hyperaware as the hours tick past, of how in just a few more he’ll have to get up for his *stupid* run, despite the fact he’s legs are still burning from the one he slugged through yesterday.

He’s *exhausted*, but somehow, sleep evades him. Eventually he gives

up all together, rolls out of bed and crosses to his desk. He strains his eyes in the low light, pouring over the homework Aizawa corrected on Thursday.

He's hoping to tire himself out with the work, but even *that* doesn't seem willing to go his way. He gets stuck on one of the first questions. A math problem, circled in ink. The page is hatched with corrections, but this one was left blank, a puzzle to solve alone. He runs the numbers again and again, every time coming up with the same answer. He drags his fingers through his hair and stares at the page. Taps his pencil. Bites his lip. He still can't tell where he went wrong.

It must be lack of sleep, he eventually reasons. He's crossed through the night and well into morning now. Fuck, he might as well start the run now.

He sighs and tucks the page off to the side. He'll figure it out later.

Chapter End Notes

I know that in canon Maijima is probably the Support Course's homeroom teacher but uuuuhhhhhhhh who cares am I right?

My Friend

Hitoshi trudges up the apartment stairs with heavy eyes and aching legs. His cheeks are flushed from exertion, breaths shallow. And though he just ran for 35 *entire* minutes—better than yesterday's time by hardly a few seconds—he's *cold*. Every morning is just a little bit colder, a little bit darker, as the weeks wind deeper into autumn. Eventually, he'll be finishing his run before the sun's even up. He's always dead on his feet by the time the school day is done, but part of him wishes he'd picked evenings instead. Getting up early *sucks*.

Still, there's hardly a point in complaining – not half because he's got exactly *no one* to complain *to* in the first place. He chose mornings and now he's got to stick with them. Follow the schedule and act your part, Aizawa said. That's all he's got to do.

His keys slip from his hands before he can unlock the door, and Hitoshi actually groans to bend down and retrieve them. God, he's so *sore*.

At last, he manages the feat of fumbling inside and kicking off his shoes. He peers into the kitchen, where the clock above the stove reads 6:49. Shit. He'll have to shower quick if he wants to get any breakfast – the train to Musatafu only comes every half-hour. Then again, he thinks with a humourless smirk, he's a delinquent now. It wouldn't kill to be late. *Again*.

"I must be dreaming."

His eyes snap to the source of the noise with a start. Mom stands at the table, hair loose and sleep-mused, a steaming mug in hand.

He does a double-take over the clock – she's usually long gone for work by this time. Mom always tells him when the schedule changes, but then again, he's been more than a little distracted lately, to say the least.

She grins. "So?"

He shakes his head. "Uh, sorry, what?"

"You gonna explain this fever dream to me or what? Because you? Running? Of your own *free will*? It's not possible."

“Oh, um.” He shifts his feet. “I don’t know. I just thought it’d be—you know, good for me.”

“Not buying it.”

For a split second, his stomach drops to his heels. But she’s only laughing. “No, no, it’s gotta be something else. Hm.” She taps her chin. “Let me guess! You’re buffing up to impress someone, aren’t you? Someone at school?”

The panic eases. “Yeah,” he says, forcing a small laugh. “You got me.”

There’s a pause. Her smiles fades. “Toshi?”

“Hm?”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” he says, and *shit*, did he say that way too fast? He said that way too fast, didn’t he?

He knows he’s fucked up when mom lowers her mug and beckons him forward with a hand outstretched. Hitoshi sighs in surrender but goes anyway – he’s long since learned there’s no way to get out of his particular ritual of theirs. “I’m not sick.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll be the judge of that.” Her hand is warm from the mug, and Hitoshi leans in to let it slide across his forehead, feels his eyes slip closed under the smell of green tea and the hospital’s faintly lavender-scented soap. He sighs again, this time feeling his shoulders relax with the breath, all liquid warmth as something calming and familiar and entirely *mom* washes over him.

“Stop using your quirk on me,” he whines, but there’s no bite behind the words. “I’m not a baby.”

“Are too,” she hums. “You’re *my* baby.” After a moment, her hand leaves his forehead, but it’s only to drift up into his hair, fingers combing back where it’s grown too long, careless of the dried sweat.

The feeling ebbs away and his eyes flutter open. She’s watching him, lips tugged low and eyes soft. “I heard you moving around last night. Trouble sleeping?”

“A little,” he admits. This part’s not even a lie – despite the exhaustion that clings to his limbs like weights, he hasn’t gotten a good night’s

rest in nearly a week. Though, he thinks bitterly, that's probably good for his *acting career* – to be tired and snappy, to be falling asleep in class, to be such an asshole that everyone just gives up on him.

He blinks, shaking the thought. He's just playing a part, he reminds himself. Hell, he asked for this. He *wants* this.

"I'm fine," he says. "Really."

Mom gives him another searching look before she finally pulls away. "But seriously. *Running?*"

He laughs. "Wow, I thought you'd be proud, *doc*. It's good for my health, isn't it?"

"Don't fish for compliments," she says. "*Of course* I'm proud." The words are sincere, if layered with a shield of sarcasm. She nudges his shoulder, just hard enough to send him on his way back down the hall. "Now, go shower already. There's no way I'm driving you to school smelling like that!"

Hitoshi's not one to pass up that kind of offer – he's ready to go in fifteen minutes. Mom watches him stuff down a hasty breakfast in thirty seconds flat with only *mild* disgust, and then they're off. The traffic's never great in the mornings, but it still beats the crowded lurch of the train, and Hitoshi's got no one to perform for here. He taps his feet along to the radio while mom chats about the day ahead. He cracks the windows, and while the city air isn't exactly *fresh*, it still does the job of waking him up – breeze sharp and sun warm on his face. Mom drops him off outside the main gates, and Hitoshi waves her on as she takes off again.

He drops the arm as soon as she's out of sight, expression falling tight and guarded, posture slouched. He buries his hands in his pockets, glares up at the gates.

He plays his part.

Still, his step is just a little lighter that day.

Thursday, Hitoshi slips into the gym exactly two minutes late,

breathless from his race up the stairs. He had to wait longer than usual to sneak through at Jōshubi, caught as he was behind one particularly lethargic student. He hopes Aizawa will forgive the break in schedule this once – it was, after all, to avoid being seen.

Still, he's on the defensive when he finally bursts in through the doors. "Sorry I'm late. I got caught behind—"

He stops short.

Across the room, seated primly atop the seat of a stationary bike, is Principal Nedzu.

"Ah, sir." Hitoshi hastily drops into a bow. "I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting you."

"That's quite alright." Nedzu grins and beckons him over. "I thought I'd surprise you with a special lesson of my own today. I hope that's not too much of a disappointment – Aizawa tells me your lessons together are going quite well."

It's not that it's a disappointment—Hitoshi will take all the help he can get, no matter *who's* giving it—it's just, well. He *was* kind of looking forward to telling Aizawa he's already managed to shave six minutes off his fastest time.

Nedzu gestures for him to sit, and Hitoshi does, a little awkwardly, cross-legged with his backpack at his side. Like this, they're almost at eye level. His precarious position aside, Nedzu looks for all the world as regal as he did all those weeks ago behind his desk at UA, hands neatly folded in his lap, eyes dark and gleaming.

"We've made progress."

Hitoshi blinks. "We have?"

"I overheard Maijima in the staff lounge a few days ago. Word is circling of your misbehaviour." Nedzu says it like it's a good thing – a *great thing*, even, and it takes Hitoshi a second to remind himself that it *is*. Pro Hero or not, Maijim's only human. Even his patience would have run out at some point. That was, after all, the point.

Nedzu saves him from having to force out a response – it seems he's excited enough for the both of them. "With any luck, this will peak the interest of our traitor. Assuming it hasn't been peaked already," he chuckles. "Your tussle with young Mr. Monoma Neito from 1-B last

week was *all* the chatter, from what I heard.”

“Wow.” Hitoshi rubs his neck, embarrassed. “Word travels fast, I guess.”

“Indeed.” His eyes glint with delight. “Now it’s time for us to begin preparing for when the traitor reaches out to you. You need to be ready to milk them for whatever information you can. Of course, the trick is to do this without *seeming* to be.”

Hitoshi nods. This might be the most important part of all – the part that could actually help them stop the League of Villains, maybe even once and for all.

“Aizawa tells me your performance when lying lacks a certain level of finesse,” Nedzu says. “This is where we’ll start. Your main tell is body language.”

Hitoshi straightens at the mention. It’s true. He and Aizawa have already been over this.

But Nedzu, it seems, has *much* more to say on the topic.

“You often fail to make eye-contact. You also have a habit of touching your neck or face, or otherwise fidgeting to take up time while you think of your lie. You also tend to revert to short or mono-syllabic answers, though this habit is not necessarily a bad thing, as it can be less incriminating than those who tend to ramble or add too much detail to their lies.” Nedzu pauses. “Do you disagree with any of this so far?”

“Um. No, sir,” he stammers. “At least—I don’t think so?” He rubs his neck, then quickly pulls the hand back down. He had no idea Nedzu had picked up on so much – they’ve only ever spoken face-to-face, what? *Once?*

“Precisely. These are all behaviours you do subconsciously, which is why it will take conscious effort to unlearn them. Of course, it cannot *look* like it takes effort, or else we have already lost.”

“Of course,” Hitoshi agrees, a little dazed.

Nedzu takes pity. “I don’t mean to sound so critical. Everyone has tells, I assure you. In fact, once you know what to look for, they are exceptionally easy to find. Aizawa, for example, speaks sharply when he is being untruthful, especially to cover feelings of guilt or stress.”

Hitoshi's ears perk at that. Even Aizawa? He always seems so— stoic. Like he's a few minutes from rigor mortis setting in.

He leans in, and before he can stop himself, asks, "What are yours, sir?"

Nedzu blinks. "Come again?"

"What are your tells?"

There's a beat before Nedzu answers, a strange moment of tension— just long enough for Hitoshi to fear he's crossed some sort of line—but Nedzu only chuckles. "I don't have any, Shinsou. I've long since trained myself out of them."

"Of course," he backtracks. "That's very impressive, sir."

Nedzu accepts the compliment with a gracious nod. His eyes don't leave Hitoshi's face.

"When my quirk first developed," he says, at after a long moment, "I wasn't yet legally recognized as a higher-thinking creature. I had no rights. I had to fight for those. I had to convince both my captors, and soon after, the entire legal panel assigned to my case, that I deserved to be treated with dignity and respect."

Hitoshi is very still. Nedzu's voice has grown soft, expression pulled into a melancholic sort of smile. He gets the feeling very few people have gotten to hear this story.

"Many people were skeptical—afraid, even—of my superior intelligence. In the end, I had to play it down in order to win their hearts. To gain their sympathy, I had to play up my weakest point – emotional vulnerability. I had to convince them that I was like them."

His gaze shifts, once more focused and sharp. "That is what I must ask of you, Shinsou. You must convince the traitor that you are just like them, that you are deserving of their sympathy. You must win their heart. I know it might seem impossible, but I *truly* believe that is how we will beat them."

Something warm swells in his chest – so bright it's almost painful. Hitoshi swallows it down with a nod, firm and determined. "Please teach me."

“Compartmentalize,” Nedzu says. “Don’t think of it as acting. Use the frustration and pain you *genuinely* feel at being stereotyped as villainous, at being cast out from hero society. Allow yourself to express that pain. That kind of sincerity will attract those who are like-minded. It will earn you not only their sympathy, but their respect.”

It’s *strange*, to hear someone—the *Principal of UA* no less—speak this reality out loud. With a few words, he’s captured the weight of years of second glances and hesitant responses, of people double-taking over his identification records, shivering at the word *Brainwashing* like it might slip off the page and beneath their skin.

He’s not allowed to take notes—evidence like that would be far too incriminating—but he listens at rapt attention. “Yes, sir.”

“Whoever they are, however they approach you, you mustn’t accept them *too* easily. That would seem suspicious. Surprise, of course, should be your first reaction. At the same time, don’t act too aloof. Be frightened, uncertain – that will make them feel powerful. But be curious as well, even a little eager. That kind of energy is naturally attractive.”

It’s a lot to remember, but he knows he can do it. “Yes, sir.”

“You’ll have to work with however they offer themselves to you. They might approach you as a business partner, or a friend, or even a sort of surrogate family. Ask them for advice, show them you need emotional support. It will endear you to them.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And remember, Shinsou,” Nedzu finally says, as they are closing out the end of their lesson. “Don’t let your guard down. It could be *anyone*.”

And isn’t that a dizzying thought, on top of everything else. It could be *anyone*.

“Did you ever think it was me?”

The words leave his mouth before the thought has even formed, and he feels himself blush. “It’s just—well, with my quirk and all, people

tend to think—you know.”

If Nedzu’s surprised, he doesn’t show it. “You must understand, Shinsou,” he says. “I couldn’t afford to take chances – I was suspicious of everyone, at first. Regardless of quirks or natural inclinations.”

Hitoshi thinks of a list of villainous quirks—a list of *monsters*—with his name at the bottom. An honourable mention, saved only by a technicality. Is that his *natural inclination*?

“But I am confident. Shinsou, I have the *utmost* confidence in you. That is why I have entrusted this challenging task to you. Because I believe you *can* be a hero. You can be UA’s hero – here, now, by doing this.”

Hitoshi bites his lip to hide the smile that threatens to break out across his face. He gives a small bow in thanks—just long enough to wonder if this counts as a tell too—but when he looks up, Nedzu’s grinning too.

Here’s the thing.

Between all the acting lessons, and the asscrack-of-dawn morning runs, and the ever-growing pile of cram homework, life is just that: *life*.

It’s different now, certainly, and in ways he never thought it would be. He’s a *hero* now, for one thing. Or, something resembling a hero anyway. But nobody knows it. Nobody *can*.

And it’s hard. But more than that, it’s *boring*. He still wakes up every morning, takes the train, goes to school, takes the train again, goes to bed. He still chats with mom over breakfast and eats dinner alone. He still drinks iced coffee that does nothing to cure his perpetual exhaustion, still plays too many video games, still fills his sketchbook with unfinished drawings only to scratch them out later.

There are moments of heightened emotion – when he’s being reamed out by Yamada for his flagging participating mark, when he returns Monoma’s jibes in the hallway, when he lies to mom and says, *I’m fine, I swear, I just like running okay?*

But at a certain point, it all kind of starts to blur. The lessons, the lies, the sleepless nights. He tries to remember, he is a hero—he *is* a hero—he’s just *acting* like a delinquent, like an outcast, like a *villain*, and, *Relax, mom, I slept fine last night, I promise*, and, don’t touch your neck, don’t look away, hold your ground, compartmentalize—

He tries to remember.

But sometimes, it’s hard.

Sometimes, when his mouthing off earns him another detention from Kayama, or his cold demeanor garners yet more whispers in the hallway, or he has to stand through another speech from Maijima about how *disappointed* he is, well. It’s hard to remember what it’s all for. Harder still, when he knows he’s playing in to the one stereotype he’s worked his whole life to reverse, the one thing he wanted to become a hero to *change*.

But he has to be realistic about it. His quirk was never meant for throwing punches in alleyways or rescuing civilians from crumbling buildings. Even in his wildest dreams, he never imagined being that kind of hero.

He just. Didn’t imagine being this kind either. The kind who takes his lunch in the stairwell, who glares at passing students until they clear out of sight, who sits with his earbuds blaring and head tucked behind his journal, sketching in bleeding ink only to flip the page when someone walks by, because delinquents don’t draw, do they, and he has to stay vigilant, has to play his part at all times, always on edge, because it could be anyone, *anyone*—

“Hey.”

He slams the sketchbook closed, shrinks back to glare at a pair of bright red shoes, then up further until he reaches a familiar face.

Midoriya Izuku blinks down at him. “Sorry to interrupt.”

For a moment, Hitoshi’s frozen, stunned to have even been approached. Then he spots the gaggle of curious faces watching from across the hall – four or five vaguely familiar 1-A students. Midoriya’s friends.

“You know you don’t have to spend lunch here, right? There’s plenty of empty tables in the cafeteria.” Midoriya tries for a smile.

“Are you *stupid*?”

The smile dies a quick death.

“Why the fuck are you talking to me? Go bother someone else.”

“Don’t be so rude,” a voice snaps. “He’s only saying hello.”

“It’s okay, Uraraka,” Midoriya says, but his eyes don’t leave Hitoshi’s face. He tilts his head as though studying a particularly difficult puzzle.

Hitoshi shrinks under the gaze. “I said fuck off.”

Unsurprisingly, Midoriya does the literal *exact* opposite, instead dropping down into a crouch. The maneuver puts them at eye-level, and when Midoriya speaks, his voice is pitched low, so the words exist only in the space between them.

“Is everything okay?”

Hitoshi’s like a deer in Midoriya’s headlights. His thoughts stutter, incredulous. “Why do you *care*?”

“Because you’re my friend?”

Hitoshi almost laughs. “No, I’m *really* not.” He shakes his head, gathers the threads of himself back together, and presses on. “Look, just because you’re in the Hero Course doesn’t mean everyone needs you to *save them*. Mind your own fucking business.”

Midoriya doesn’t move. A bubble of frustration swells through him, hot and angry, and for a brief, intoxicating second, Hitoshi considers using his quirk. It would be easy – Midoriya’s already spoken. A few words and he’d be gone, just like that.

He shakes the thought. He can’t. He shouldn’t. Midoriya’s friends are right here, a few of them already bristling. One girl looks about ready to slap him. And Hitoshi’s really not into the idea of getting his ass kicked, no matter how good it might be for his delinquent reputation.

Midoriya frowns, hesitating one last second before he stands. “Okay. But just so you know, I still think we are.”

“Are *what*?”

“Friends.”

Hitoshi rolls his eyes. “Oh, fuck off.” Unoriginal, maybe—he hasn’t yet mastered the art of elaborate threats—but it’s effective. Midoriya finally, *finally* turns back to join his friends, most of whom seem much more eager to be gone.

Hitoshi releases a sigh and tips his head back against the wall with a dull thump. His eyes slip closed. *Jeez*. He knew Midoriya had a saviour complex—that much was obvious from his performance at the Sports Festival—but *damn*, does he ever quit?

He cracks an eye to give the hall a final sweep before dropping his guard – and it’s a good thing he does, because it isn’t until then that he notices he’s still not alone.

One of the students hung back. It takes a double-take to realize who, not trusting his own sight at first when he sees a UA uniform suspended in air. The invisible girl from 1-A. Hagakure Something.

Hitoshi scowls. “*What?*”

The collar tilts, like she’s cocked her head. Ugh. Not *this* again.

“Fuck *off* already,” he snaps. “Go hang out with your stupid fucking hero friends, damnit.”

With no expression, it’s hard to tell how effective his words are, but she only stays another moment before seeming to shrug. He watches her go this time, just to make sure.

Finally, the coast is clear. Hitoshi pulls his knees to his chest and pillows his head against folded arms. What *is* it with these Hero Course kids? They’re either unusually perceptive, unusually dense, or both.

He laughs into his arms, just a little, humourless and dark. For the first time since maybe *ever*, he’s actually glad he’s not in their class.

The Brainwasher

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year!

This chapter involves me calling baloney on some of the more recent retcons done to Shinsou's quirk abilities in the manga, so be warned ye who like canon-compliance. In fact, be warned in general – I'll be taking more and more creative liberties with canon events and characterizations as time goes on. The butterfly effect is a terrible and wonderful thing.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

On Thursday, Hitoshi slips through the gym doors to be greeted with an unimpassioned, “Did you bring a change of clothes?”

He bows, despite Aizawa's apparent desire to skip the formalities, but jumps straight to the “Yes, sensei.” He's been bringing extra clothes every week, as instructed, though he hasn't needed them since the first session. Honestly, he hadn't expected to this time either – things have been different every week so far. But maybe it's finally time to redeem himself from his not-so-stellar Assessment Test. Or maybe—he hardly dares to think—combat training.

“Get dressed.” Aizawa gestures to the bathrooms, and Hitoshi takes off running.

He changes in a crowded shower stall, equal measures excited and nervous. He's been hoping Aizawa would offer some sort combat instruction since the beginning. His quirk isn't exactly useful in a brawl when he can't get a word in, and he's always known he'd have to learn to defend himself if he wanted to be a hero. Still, he takes a deep breath before he gets carried away, the mantra reminder of *be realistic* like a drum against his skull. This isn't a combat mission – it would make perfect sense if Nedzu and Aizawa planned to see this thing through without ever teaching him to fight.

When he steps back outside, it's to find Aizawa standing loose-limbed on the dojo mat in the center of the room, hair tied and sleeves rolled back. Hitoshi approaches cautiously – a flutter in his stomach which he's careful not to show on his face. He tries to copy the body language – arms slightly bent, weight rolled up on the balls of his feet.

He wouldn't be surprised if Aizawa were about to hit him with some sort of surprise attack – that seems like his style.

But nothing of the sort happens. Instead, he simply says, “Your quirk. Tell me about it.”

The tension snaps and Hitoshi's posture deflates, wordless at the unexpected weight of disappointment. He scrambles to find the words for the diagnosis he's had memorized since the age of six.

The brainwasher, he remembers the doctor greeting him, voice grave. Like it was some kind of fatal disease.

“Brainwashing. Allows me to command others when given a verbal response,” he recites. “Only activates when willed.”

Aizawa raises an eyebrow. “Go on.”

“That's—uh. That's it.”

“Give me the specifics.”

“What do you mean?”

Something hardens in Aizawa's face and Hitoshi suppresses a wince. He's not trying to be difficult. That's all there is.

“How many people can you control at once?”

“Up to three, but I've never— That's the most I've ever tried.”

“For how long?”

“I don't know.”

He doesn't look convinced. “You *don't know*?”

Hitoshi shakes his head. “I've never given someone an order then just... left them there? That would be pretty sh—um. Mean.”

Aizawa nods in concession, but he doesn't look happy about it. “Alright, what about in training?”

“I don't,” he says. “Have training.”

Aizawa's eyes narrow, but he doesn't speak. Unsure, Hitoshi continues, “General Ed doesn't get quirk specific training. We just do,

like, regular old Phys Ed.”

“Right,” Aizawa says quickly. “Of course.”

Hitoshi frowns – Aizawa should know this, shouldn’t he? He *works* at UA. Hell, he was *in* the General stream once.

Memory lapse aside, Aizawa recovers smoothly. “Do you need a verbal response, *specifically*? What if a person acknowledges you but doesn’t speak? And how complex can the actions you order be? Can they require higher reasoning or long-term judgement?”

Hitoshi can’t help it – he laughs. It’s an ugly thing, sharp and bitter. “I don’t know,” he says. “The most I’ve ever used my quirk was at the Sports Festival, in the cavalry battle. So, I guess I can make people, like, carry me? And run around? But I don’t know if I could make someone do a puzzle or something.” It’s a lot, the words all rushing out of him in one breath. It’s not that he’s never wondered these questions himself, but he’s certainly never answered them out loud. Nobody’s ever asked. Nobody ever wants to know.

Moreover, he’s never been given the *chance* to test his own limits. He doesn’t exactly have test subjects throwing themselves at him. People don’t like when he uses his quirk. Hell, *he* doesn’t really like it, especially not when it clearly makes everyone so uncomfortable. It’s like once people know what he’s capable of, they expect him to do it just because he can. It’s all they can focus on – what he might do, what he could do. He stops being Hitoshi and becomes *the brainwasher*.

“Alright,” Aizawa says at length, lips curved in a thoughtful frown. He cracks his neck, shakes out his arms, and says, “Let’s test it out.”

Hitoshi’s self-deprecating spiral stutters to a halt. “What? Right now?”

“Yes,” Aizawa says. There’s nothing in his voice to indicate this is some kind of test – no humour, no malice. He’s terribly, brutally serious.

“On *you*?”

“Who else?”

Hitoshi looks. There’s no one else, of course, but—but. “You want me to test it on *you*?” he repeats, just to be sure.

Aizawa raises an eyebrow. He looks ready to bite out some sharp retort, but he pauses. Something in his face softens. “Yes, Shinsou,” he says. “I want you to test it on me.”

It takes him much longer than it probably should to process this, but Aizawa doesn’t seem inclined to rush anymore. He’s *actually* serious. He actually wants to do this.

“Okay,” Hitoshi manages.

A teacher. He’s about to use his quirk on a *teacher*. No, on a *hero*. But. He volunteered.

“Okay,” he says again, firmer now. “What should I make you do?”

Aizawa’s gaze settles on the climbing wall across the room. It’s low – only about ten feet high, with plenty of footholds and outcropping ledges. “That.”

Hitoshi nods. No big deal. He’s just going to make Aizawa climb a wall. Easy peasy. He’s already got the verbal response and everything. Now it’s just a matter of saying it.

With a final breath, he speaks.

One summer, when Shouta was sixteen, he spent a weekend with Hizashi at his parent’s cabin in the countryside. On their last night, Hizashi introduced him to his trick of opening his dad’s liquor cabinet, and together they emptied an entire bottle of saké down by the lake.

They’d sat on the docks, legs just barely long enough to graze the still surface of the water, swatting at mosquitoes and complaining about the clouds which obscured the stars until they were both drunk enough that it didn’t matter anymore.

At sixteen, Shouta had hardly ever had a friend before, much less one he could get clandestinely drunk with. His cheeks were pink after only a few sips, and by the time the bottle was empty, he could hardly stand from laughing at about every second word out of Hizashi’s mouth.

To this day, Shouta doesn’t remember who suggested it, but

somewhere along the line of bad, drunken ideas, the two teens found themselves in the water. The clouds had finally cleared, and in his drunken state, the night felt blissfully warm.

At one point, Shouta remembers coming up for a lungful of air. His senses returned to him in a rush as he crested the lull. Suddenly, his ears were full of the cries of cicadas, the lakeside breeze sharp against his flushed cheeks, his vision spinning and full of stars.

Coming out of being brainwashed is kind of like that.

There are no cicadas this time. No cool breeze or breathtaking night skies. But there is a moment like cresting dark waters, like slugging off the daze of one too many sips of saké, when everything snaps from blurry to focused and he realizes—

Shit.

He's on top of the wall.

He doesn't shout, doesn't lose his balance. But he does feel, for a split-second, his stomach drop into freefall. He sways, then, with an ease built from years of practice, slips off the side and lands in a crouch before straightening out.

Shinsou's exactly where he left him, eyes locked to his movement, expression carefully neutral. Fragile as glass and twice as transparent.

"Did you let me go or did I snap out of it once the order was complete?" Shouta asks.

"I let go," Shinsou says. Then, a beat late, "I can hold people between orders."

"What do they do then?"

"Nothing." He looks like he's expecting something – some sort of major reaction. That in itself says a lot.

Shinsou's clearly not comfortable using his quirk. That's not uncommon for first year students though, and with as little experience as Shinsou has, Shouta's not surprised.

What *does* surprise him is how drastic of a change it seems from what Shouta remembers of him during the Sports Festival. Whether it's because he values a teacher's opinion more than that of his peers, or

because he's simply never been given *permission* to use his quirk before, Shouta isn't sure. But he's not here to coddle the kid – whatever inferiority complex he's got will have to wait. He's here to help Shinsou master his talent, learn its limits, and—with any luck—break them. It's not even likely that he'll need it on the current mission, but he *will* need confidence and strategic thinking, which working on his quirk can help build.

“Did I seem unsteady or slow when climbing?”

“I don't know, maybe a little?”

Shouta hums. Brainwashing might impair fine motor skills. That's important to know.

“Is it a strain on you?” he continues. “To control other people?”

“No,” Shinsou says. “It just takes, um. Focus?”

Good. That could have been a hindrance, moving forward as a hero. Or—student.

“What about Midoriya Izuku, during the Sports Festival? He seemed to snap out of it by himself. How did that happen?”

Shinsou considers. “Well, people usually snap out of it if there's physical interference. Like, someone hits them or something.” His hand twitches but stills before he can rub his neck. Good, Nedzu's lessons are working. Still, his discomfort bleeds though, clear as day. “I guess when Midoriya broke his fingers that counted? I'm not exactly sure how it works.”

It strikes him as particularly strange, that sentence. *I'm not exactly sure how it works.*

Suddenly, Shouta's reminded of the years and years of students he's worked with, brimming with nerves and the desire to please, eager to tell him every single little detail about the many *many* uses of their quirks, lists they've recited a thousand times before.

“You've never asked yourself any of these questions?” he hears himself ask. “Never tested it out?”

Shinsou is quiet for a long time. Then, “The most I've ever used it was the Sports Festival. I had to. It was my only chance to get into the Hero Course. So, it was worth it, you know?”

“Worth it?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s not exactly worth showing off, most of the time. It’s —weird. People don’t like it. Obviously.” The last word slips out in a whisper, mouth snapping shut like he could catch it back from the air. But it’s already out. And with it, something clicks.

“You mean they think it’s a villain’s quirk.”

Shinsou doesn’t meet his eye. “Well. Yeah.”

“And what do you think?”

Another pause. Shinsou sighs. “I think it’s *scary*, having your autonomy taken from you. I think I’d be scared too, if I knew someone could do that to me. I think it could do a lot of damage, in a villain’s hands.”

It goes unspoken, but Shouta hears it just as well. The details, the uses. A list he’s recited a thousand times before.

“What about in your hands?”

Shinsou says nothing. Damnit, the kid still won’t even meet his eye. And Shouta’s not here to coddle him. He’s *not*. But.

“Any quirk can be a villain’s quirk, if used the wrong way. Any quirk. Even All Might’s. Even mine.”

“It’s not the same.”

“It is,” Shouta says. *It is*. “People don’t like your quirk because it makes them powerless. So does mine. But that doesn’t make it inherently bad, and it doesn’t make *me* inherently bad. It’s how I use it that makes me a hero.”

Shinsou scoffs, directionless and resigned. “How am I supposed to use my quirk to be like All Might? To be like you? I can’t exactly fight villains with words.”

“It’s not always about fighting. It’s not always that easy.” It’s not all black-and-white, smile-for-the-cameras and slap on the cuffs. People with quirks like Shouta’s, with quirks like Shinsou’s, they don’t *get* to be the Symbol of Peace. They have to dabble in the gray. Shinsou might be naive, but he’s not an idiot – he *knows* this.

Still, sometimes it helps to hear it out loud.

“There’s more than one way to be a hero.”

A little cheesy, maybe, but there’s more truth to the admission than anything that’s been shoved down the kid’s throat so far. This should have been the first lesson, day one.

Again, Shinsou’s quiet, and for a moment, Shouta worries he’s gone too far, stepped into something he didn’t mean to, hit too many soft spots. But slowly, Shinsou raises his head, and behind the calloused and world-weary stare, he can see it – that spark. All his students have it.

“Yeah, I know,” he says. And quietly, “Thanks, though.”

Shouta watches the tension drain from Shinsou’s shoulders, feels himself breathe a little deeper with it gone. He’s struck with the bizarre sensation that he should *do* something – put a hand on the kid’s shoulder, maybe. Something to comfort him.

He buries the urge instead, spins around to where he left his bag by the door. Feeling the curious stare on the back of his neck, he crouches, retrieves his wallet, and pulls out a single blank check.

“Next task,” he says. “See if you can make me write you a check for ten-thousand yen.”

He’s mostly joking, even though a part of him does want to see how badly brainwashing impairs fine motor skills.

The other part, though, just wants to see Shinsou laugh at the idea.

Chapter End Notes

Aizawa been drinking that Respect Shinsou juice.

Not a Perfect Son

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

That night, the train runs late.

Hitoshi doesn't get home until well after sunset. His stomach growls loud enough to hear through his earbuds, and his feet drag so that they hardly leave the floor between steps.

He's got a shitload of cram work to get through tonight. He's already fallen way behind in Nedzu's supplementary English readings, and the other subjects aren't exactly waiting for him to catch up either. He also needs to remember to turn up the volume on his alarm before he goes to bed – he overslept and almost missed his run this morning.

There's a part of him that thinks he could probably *benefit* from a day of sleeping in. The extra energy might give him the boost he needs to finally get through all that homework. It's just wishful thinking – if there's one thing he's learned from Aizawa, it's not to deter from the schedule. The traitor will only approach if they feel safe doing so, and that means giving them as many consistent opportunities as possible.

Still. He's fucking exhausted. More than usual – which is really saying something. Distantly, he wonders if it has anything to do with using his quirk. He remembers being dead on his feet after the Sports Festival too, though at the time he'd blamed it on the adrenaline crash from his fight with Midoriya.

Does everyone get tired after straining their quirk? He uses his so infrequently, it's hard to know much of anything about its effects. Still, after only a single session with Aizawa, he's already learned so much.

Aizawa could read and write while brainwashed, but didn't seem to take much meaning from the text. He could speak, but it helped to be fed the words directly. He didn't seem capable of much high-level judgement, and thinking on the spot seemed a challenge too, but for the most part, he could do what was asked of him without problem.

Most importantly though, was that even afterwards, he wasn't *bothered* by any of it. He wasn't bothered that Hitoshi used him as a test dummy. He trusted him. He *still* trusted him.

So much that, for maybe the first time in his life, Hitoshi doesn't hesitate to think about doing it again next week. Surely Aizawa will have thought of more limits to test by then. Hitoshi might even brainstorm a few suggestions himself.

For now though: homework. Well, food first. Then homework.

Hitoshi fumbles with his keys before shouldering the front door open, sheds his jacket and backpack, and nearly trips over his own feet as he kicks off his shoes. He gives up on the light switch after his third missed swipe, instead squints in the dark glow of the nearby kitchen light, the only source in an otherwise sleeping household.

Or. Not sleeping, apparently.

Mom sits at the kitchen table, legs crossed with a fist under her chin.

Hitoshi does a table-take and freezes. "Uh, hi?"

"Hey." She nudges the chair beside her. "Come sit?"

He does, after a pause, chin low and expression guarded.

"How was cram school?" she asks.

"Good," he says, and doesn't fidget. "How was work?"

"Good."

Hitoshi nods. "Good."

The silence drags. There's something heavy there, something Hitoshi can't place, and frankly isn't sure he wants to. Finally, mom breaks it, breathing out long and hard through her nose, hands flat on the table. "I got a call from your Homeroom teacher today."

"Oh," Hitoshi says, instead of the more pressing, *Shit*.

"He said you got a 54% on your History exam."

"Well," he says slowly. "It *was* History. You know I suck at remembering, like, dates and stuff."

"That's no excuse." Her tone is hard, challenging. "54, Toshi. 54."

Shame twists in his gut, but he's careful not to let it show. "Look," he bites. "I get it, okay?" And then, before he can stop himself, "Sorry I'm

not a perfect son.”

“*Don’t.*” Her fingers curl. “Don’t bullshit me. Because your teacher *also* told me your grades are slipping in English and Maths. *Maths*, Hitoshi. You *love* Maths.”

There’s a moment, looking up at her scowl, where some bitter, twisted part of him croons to play along, play his part, play the *villain* – even though this is home, this is *mom*, he doesn’t have to *lie* to her like everyone else—

“Fuck, okay,” he snaps. “Sorry! Is that what you want?”

“I *want* to know why you’re letting your grades drop—”

“Sorry *school* isn’t the most important thing in my life!”

“—and *picking fights* with other students!”

The accusation hits like a slap, the silence that follows suffocating.

“Yeah,” she says. “Maijima told me about *that* too.”

The anger drains out like someone’s pulled the plug. Hitoshi sags with it, gutted.

“Look,” mom says. “Hitoshi, look. I don’t expect you to be perfect, okay? I know I’m not perfect either.”

“Mom.”

“I know I’m not home enough—”

“*Mom.*”

“And I know. I know. It’s not a great time of year, ever since your dad —”

“That’s not it,” he says hurriedly, stomach tight. “It’s not. I promise.”

She sighs. “Then what, kiddo? What’s going on? Bad grades are one thing, but picking fights? That’s not like you.” She looks—miserable. There’s no other word for it. The fluorescents buzz overhead, catching every dark bag, every wrinkle – the pallor of her skin, the wet shine of her eyes and tug of her frown. “What’s going on, Toshi?”

He wants to tell her, but—

The lights stutter.

But he *can't*.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. "I've just... I've been letting the stress get to me."

"Stress?"

He nods miserably. "School stress."

"From cram school?"

"No!" he says. Too quick, too loud. "No, no. Just regular school."

"Is it the hero stuff?" she asks. "I know you really wanted to get into the Hero Course. I know you were staking everything on the Sports Festival, and I'm sorry it didn't work out, honey. But you can't—You can't let that affect you so much."

"I know," he says. "I'm sorry."

"There are still other things you can do," she says. "Other ways you can—"

"I know," he cuts in. Softens his voice. "It's not the hero stuff, I promise. Can we just drop it? Please?"

There's another long moment before she sighs, shaky with an unseen weight, eyes raking him over once last time. "Okay," she says at length. And then again, to herself, "Okay."

She stands and finally tears away her gaze, letting it roam the kitchen in obvious search of a distraction. "You want something to eat?"

"No," Hitoshi says, to the empty air between them. He's lost his appetite anyway. "I'll be okay."

As a general rule, Nedzu likes to keep busy.

It's not hard, with an occupation like his. When he's not supervising every movement of his school's eccentric student body like some kind

of over-qualified sheep herder, he's doing the same for the even more outlandish staff. When he's not doing that, he's assigning timeslots and approving trips, debating curriculums with the school board and debating ethics with the hero committee, assuaging parental concerns and balancing the ever-precarious PR scandals his wards somehow constantly seem to find themselves in. And for the most part, he *thrives* on it – on the hectic pace and the endless list of responsibilities, stretching his mind like one might stretch a cramping limb, keeping it active, keeping it *busy*.

But sometimes, he really just wants to eat lunch.

On Friday, his meeting with the financial council runs twenty minutes late. A few unfortunately misplaced decimal points are all it seems to take to send humans into a spiral these days, and Nedzu has to bite his tongue to keep from saying something he'll regret when the co-founder demands they run the numbers a *third* time. *Just*, she says, *to be safe*.

When he finally manages to slip out of the boardroom, there are only ten minutes left to lunch before the next period begins and his ever-growing laundry list of duties flips itself to the next page. Nedzu sighs in acceptance of his defeat, deciding to skip the teacher's lounge and the promises of a fridge brimming with Lunch Rush's best. Instead, makes the trek back to his office.

There's a sea of paperwork there to greet him, as always, but he pushes it aside with another goal in mind. He's been meaning to draft the notices for the upcoming Provisional License Exam for a few days now – he needs to get the permission forms sent out to the parents of 1-A and 1-B at least two weeks in advance.

He's just closed the door and settled behind his desk when he hears a knock, so soft that he thinks he must have imagined it. Before he can even rise to welcome his guest, the door cracks open, and quite suddenly, Shinsou Hitoshi is in his office.

All thoughts of untyped permission forms are whisked away. Nedzu's heart nearly stops.

Has Shinsou made contact already? He'd never thought it would happen so fast – he'd fully expected another month, *at least*. His thoughts are spinning, entangled with possibilities. They'll have to set up a tail on the traitor, and stage interrogations on family and close friends. They'll have to inform the police, they'll have to—

“Sir,” Shinsou whispers. “Sir, I—I’m sorry, I need help.” His expression is pinched, lips tight, eyes downcast. He’s embarrassed.

Disappointment blows through him like a gust of cold air. He lets the threads of his plans trail off. Shinsou hasn’t made contact.

“You can’t be here,” he says, stern and quick. “We can’t have contact unless *absolutely* necessary. This would look incredibly suspicious to anyone watching.”

“I know, I know,” Shinsou says. “But I don’t know what else to do. It’s—It’s my mother.”

Whatever Nedzu had been expecting, it certainly wasn’t *that*.

“Your *mother*?”

“She’s upset,” Shinsou explains, “about my grades, about my attitude. Maijima keeps calling here every time I—”

“We’ve discussed this. Your average this semester will be based off your work in cram school. Maijima has no say,” Nedzu snaps. There’s no time for theatrics. He needs Shinsou gone, *now*. For all they know, this encounter could have already dammed them.

“But she doesn’t know that! And she’s *worried*. Sir, please. Is there—Is there any way we could tell her?”

“Tell her?” And add yet another liability to the mission? Another pair of loose lips that could go off at any minute? Nedzu shakes his head. The fewer people who know, the better. “If she’s concerned, she may come speak to me. I’m sure I can assuage her with a less damning explanation.”

Shinsou doesn’t budge. “I’m worried she’s going to take me out of school.”

“I won’t allow it to come to that.” And he most definitely *won’t*. This plan is their best shot, and he’ll be damned if it goes to waste because of a *worried mother*.

Shinsou wavers at the finality of Nedzu’s tone, who presses on, “I’ll handle it, if need be. Now—” He gestures to the door. “*Please*.” Before lunch ends and the halls are crowded. Before anyone sees him and this *entire plan* falls through.

“Y-Yes, sir,” Shinsou forces out after another moment of hesitation. He drops into a graceless bow, eyes low, and retreats to the door, pausing only one last time to check the coast before he slips into the hall and out of sight.

Monday morning, Maijima spends the first few minutes of Homeroom handing out feedback on the personal reflections 1-C wrote the first week of classes. Hitoshi, having never handed one in, slouches with his chin in hands, only to startle upright when Maijima pauses in front of his desk anyway.

“I assume you’re aware that I’ve called your mother,” he says. “But I’ll give you warning – I’m going to be calling again. Struggling on an assignment is one thing, Shinsou, but failing to even *try*? I’m incredibly disappointed in you, and I hope your mother is as well.”

Hitoshi’s stomach tightens in mortification. The whole class has turned his way and whispers light the air, but suddenly, all he can see is mom’s tired face. *Picking fights? That’s not like you.*

Maijima doesn’t move on. He looms over him, expectant – staring, *everyone’s* staring, but he has to keep up the act, he has to play his part, and everyone’s *still* staring—

“Just because you still take orders from your *mom*, doesn’t mean we all do. Why don’t you mind your own damn business about it?”

There’s a collective gasp as Maijima’s face flushes red. Hitoshi lifts his chin in defiance. He looks Maijima dead in the eye, watches him struggle for words before the indignation bursts out of him like a broken tap.

“I—I am—I am appalled, Shinsou. I’ve tried to be patient with you these past weeks, but the disrespect you’ve shown is *intolerable*. I don’t want to hear another word.” He shakes his head, like he can hardly stand to look at him another second, and drops the gavel. “Detention. Tonight.”

Hitoshi concedes, as directed, without another word. All told, it’s probably far less than he deserves, and he’s not about to push his luck. The rest of the class crawls by. The tension hangs like a bad smell, his

classmates stealing curious and accusatory glances, but Maijima never so much as looks his way again.

By lunch, word of his outburst seems to have travelled far and wide. He doesn't know how the hell high school gossip spreads so fast, but suddenly, he's catching his name in snippets of conversation at every corner.

Nauseous with embarrassment and the desire to sink through the floor and out of sight, Hitoshi puts on a brave face and takes his lunch in the cafeteria. The sight of him there alone will no doubt spur the wheels of the rumour mill even faster. He doesn't know when "*I heard Shinsou Hitoshi called Maijima's mother ugly,*" turned into "*I heard Shinsou Hitoshi threatened Maijima with a knife,*" but he hopes the traitor at least gets a good laugh out of it.

Hitoshi sits at his table, alone, and can hardly bring himself to touch his food. The weight of the stares on the back of his head burn with a near-physical pain. He might as well be in a fucking spotlight. He forces himself to hold his easy posture, ignore the looks, ignore the whispers, ignore the way his stomach churns, sick with anxiety.

But he can't ignore it when a familiar figure eclipses his vision.

"Can I sit here?"

Midoriya. Of *fucking* course.

He's alone this time, Hitoshi notes. His friends might follow him to the ends of the earth, but it seems not even the craziest of them would follow him here.

"Shinsou?" he prompts when there's no answer forthcoming.

"No," he manages, throat dry, eyes pulsing with exhaustion. There's no heat behind the words. "Fuck off."

Midoriya sits anyway.

His fists slam the table. "I said *no!*"

Midoriya startles, but doesn't leave, doesn't leave, why won't he just *fucking leave*—

"Maybe I failed this time, but I'm not giving up."

Hitoshi breathes out ragged. "What?"

“I’ll show them all I’ve got what it takes to make the Hero Course.”

“What the fuck are you—”

“I’ll become a greater hero than all of you.”

Hitoshi stares, heartbeat thunderous. Those are *his* words. His words from the Sports Festival.

“What happened?” Midoriya asks. “What happened to the Shinsou who wanted to become a hero no matter what?”

He thinks he’s going to be sick.

“Shinsou,” Midoriya says. “What happened?”

“Get up.” The words rush out like a cold wind, electric with power. The chair legs scrape the tile, impossibly loud, and Midoriya stands, eyes blank blank blank—

It’s like a fucking explosion goes off. A roar of voices closes around them, a crowd of faces swimming at the edge of his vision. Someone grabs him, tears him back and to his feet. His chair crashes to the ground and he stumbles, looking up to meet furious, mismatched eyes.

“Let him go!” someone shouts.

“Deku? Are you okay?”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Todoroki Shouto growls. The hand on his shoulder digs in like a claw, tight enough to hurt and hot enough to *burn*. “What the *hell* is wrong with you?”

“Todoroki.” Midoriya’s voice.

Hitoshi starts. He hadn’t realized he’d let Midoriya go, but here he is, green eyes stunned but alert, and oh god *oh god* what was he *thinking*, using his quirk on another student could get him *expelled*—

“Todoroki,” Midoriya says again. “It’s okay. Let him go.”

“**OOOOOOKAY, everyone!**” a booming voice interrupts, loud enough to shake the walls. “Back to your seats, please! Nothing to see here! Come on, now! Let’s go, let’s goooooooooo!”

Slowly, the crowd begins to filter back. In the space left behind, Present Mic stands, hands outstretched in a placating gesture. Beside

him, shoulders hunched and hands in his pockets, is Aizawa.

Hitoshi locks their gazes. The hand on his shoulder still burns, a sharp pain that blossoms out like razors across his skin, but Aizawa's here now, Aizawa can help, Aizawa—

—steps past him without pause.

“Todoroki. That's enough.”

The hand retracts by an inch. “Sensei, he was using—”

“I'm aware. But if you retaliate, you're no better than him.” Aizawa switches his gaze to Midoriya. “Both of you, back to your seats.”

Midoriya nods, still a little wide-eyed, but no worse for wear. “Come on, Todoroki,” he says, a hand on the other boy's elbow to guide him away.

At last, Aizawa turns his eyes to Hitoshi. But they're—cold, uncaring. There isn't so much as a pause, not even a flicker of recognition in his voice when he says, “Use your quirk on one of my students again, and that's grounds for expulsion.”

Help me, Hitoshi wills desperately. Tell me what to do.

“Do you understand?”

The words are all but carved out of him, heavy with dread, sick with shame. “Yes, sir.”

“Good.”

Aizawa walks away.

Detention passes like this.

Hitoshi arrives five minutes early, stands with anxiety thrumming beneath his skin in the empty classroom and waits for Maijima to decide what to do with him. He's made to clean the chalkboard, then the desks, and finally, the classroom floor. The work reminds him of o-soji, back in elementary school. Of course, this takes much longer –

no friends to pass the time or share the burden. No friends at all. Still, he remembers the drill well enough. He scrubs until his hands are raw, until every surface shines.

Maijima doesn't say a word.

When he's done, Hitoshi stands in front of Maijima's desk and waits to be excused.

He waits for thirty minutes. Maijima sits with his chin in hands, pen idly scratching at some paperwork, eyes never so much as flicking up in Hitoshi's direction. There's no lecture this time, no urging him to do better, no worry at his mental state or home life. Just a sigh, tired and resigned. "You can go."

The halls are emptier than he's ever seen, overheads dimmed and classroom doors locked. The only light comes from the slatted blinds of the windows, the sun low in the sky, warping his shadow as he walks. Beyond the windows, there's a shout of exhilaration, the low blast of someone's emitter quirk and a ripple of laughs. Hero training.

His steps echo as he walks.

He misses the train on purpose, takes the long way home instead. He stops for dinner at a concession stand, skips a few stones into the river by the station, wanders the streets until the weight of his backpack digging into his shoulders grows just this side of painful. Finally, he goes home.

The apartment's empty too – a blessing instead the usual disappointment. Hitoshi heads straight to his room anyway, and has long since curled up beneath the covers before he hears the front door an hour later.

She'll already have heard from Maijima. God. He probably called her at work. He squeezes his eyes shut against the embarrassment and listens carefully, trying to gauge how absolutely fucked he is from the sounds of her movement.

The floorboards creak, footsteps stop outside his door. Seconds pass, but she doesn't come in.

He holds his breath. She can probably feel his nerves radiating through the door, but that doesn't stop him from putting up a pretense of sleep. He wonders what he would feel, if he had a quirk more like hers. Anger or disappointment - he doesn't know which is worse.

The silence stretches. And stretches. But she doesn't come in, and after almost a minute, the footsteps fade back down the hall.

Chapter End Notes

Me, taking a bat to Nedzu's misogynist beliefs that a worried mother couldn't *possibly* pose enough threat to unravel his genius plan: get ready, fucko

As always, your comments and kudos keep me warm on these long winter nights.

Until next time!

Misunderstood

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

On Tuesday, Shouta works late. The classroom is quiet, empty with a desk full of paperwork and dried-out pens as his only companion as he flicks through a stack of essays that needed grading *yesterday*. Years of hero work have well-acquainted him with the hectic pace of the streets, but desk work, it seems, never gets any easier. After over an hour, he's hardly made a dent in the pile.

Shouta sighs, leans back into a stretch and blinks up at the fluorescents overhead until the backs of his eyes start to ache, and thinks, *Coffee*.

He stands, and has just slid the door open to the hall when he catches a blur of movement. Shouta freezes, eyes wide at the shock of familiar violet hair that all but flies past him.

Not Shinsou, as his initial thought had been, but an adult woman, dressed in some kind of nursing scrubs. She moves like there's a storm on her heels, back straight and steps hard until they come to a stop outside another door further down the hall. Classroom 1-C.

The door opens to a hardened face. "Mrs. Shinsou," Maijima says. "Thank you for coming."

Shit.

The woman drops into a bow so low she nearly creases in half. "Please accept my apology on behalf of my son," she says. "I struggled to believe it at first. I just— I can't believe he—" She straightens, shakes her head. "There's no excuse for such behaviour."

Shit.

Maijima nods and beckons her closer. "Please, come in. We have a lot to discuss."

The door closes before either of them spot Shouta. For a moment, he's shocked still, a growing weight in the pit of his stomach that seems to pin him in place. He breathes, loosens his posture with practiced ease, and moves with casual precision to the teacher's lounge. As planned,

he brews himself a coffee, and as planned, carries it back to his office. But he doesn't touch the stack of essays.

He waits.

With the patience of a decade's worth of surveillance jobs, Shouta doesn't let himself try to guess what's going on behind the closed door, doesn't let himself worry, doesn't let himself plan. He just sits, chair angled slightly so his sight rests on Maijima's door, and sips his coffee.

When Mrs. Shinsou re-emerges alone twenty minutes later, her face is hard mask. Not so much angry as weary – and while neither are ideal for Shinsou, Shouta at least hopes the latter means a reprieve from punishments and furious tirades.

He waits another minute for the door to open again, then quickly springs to his feet. Maijima steps out and locks the class behind him, turning around just in time catch Shouta's knowing look and emphatic “*Parents*. Am I right?”

“Ugh.” Maijima rolls his eyes. “Not this time. I'm glad she came to see me, actually. I'm at my wit's end with her kid.”

Shouta leans back, arms crossed. “That so?”

“He picked a fight with one of yours yesterday,” Maijima explains. “That incident in the cafeteria? That was Shinsou Hitoshi.”

“I've heard the name.”

“Yeah, it's crazy. He disturbs class, he's rude to his classmates, he's rude to *me*, and he hardly ever does any work.”

“Damn.” Shouta raises an eyebrow. “What's the mom got to say about it all?”

“The usual parent stuff. *He's not a bad kid, he's just misunderstood*. She seems to think he's acting out of resent that he didn't make the Hero Course.” Maijima waves a hand, clearly unimpressed with the excuse. “I don't see how he ever *could*, with his attitude. She said she's considering taking him out of UA, just to get him away from it all. Honestly, I hate to say it, but that might be best. I don't know if there's much else we can do for him here.”

Shouta blinks. “Huh.”

“We’ll see what happens. Between you and me though, no one’s going to miss him when he’s gone.” Maijima shrugs. “Anyway, that’s a problem for tomorrow, eh? See you then.”

Shouta nods and sees him off, waits just long enough to watch him disappear around the corner. Then, makes a beeline for Nedzu’s office.

“We might have a problem.”

Nedzu, to his credit, accepts the interruption without so much as batting an eye. He’s behind his desk, a cup of tea paused halfway to his lips. He lowers it, and without any of his usual theatrics, fixes Shouta with his full attention. “Oh?”

“Shinsou’s mother wants to transfer him to a new school.”

“When did you learn of this?”

“Just now. She had an appointment with Maijima.”

A pause. Then, “Shit.”

Shouta’s lips part, expression caught in surprise before he can smooth it out again. The last time he heard Nedzu swear was—well. Never.

“She’s more serious than I thought.”

“Wait,” Shouta says. “You *knew* about this?”

“I had considered the possibility,” Nedzu waves the words down. “In fact, Shinsou came to me last week to bring the matter to my attention. He wanted permission to explain the circumstances to his mother.”

Shouta blinks, lets the words settle, the weight of *not-quite-right* like something bitter at the back of his throat. “But you didn’t take him seriously.”

It’s not an accusation – not really. But Nedzu bristles anyway. “You must understand, Aizawa. Mrs. Shinsou could complicate matters tremendously. The explanation would have to be delivered delicately in order to convince her—”

Convince her? That same bitter taste explodes across his tongue. “You think she’ll protest on moral grounds?”

Nedzu chooses his next words with care. “She might not understand

that the risk to her son—however small—is necessary. She might not be able to see the larger picture of all that is at stake here. Her priority will of course be Shinsou, while ours is—”

“Also Shinsou,” Shouta cuts in. “Our first priority is always the student.”

A beat of hesitation. “Of course.”

Shouta doesn’t budge. “Nedzu.”

“Of *course*,” he says again, louder. “I only meant that we can see how, in the long run, the students *as a whole* will benefit from Shinsou’s work. His mother might not be able to.”

Shouta lets his righteous temper deflate, just a little. “I don’t disagree,” he admits. “But all the same, you’d better come up with a way to *convince* Mrs. Shinsou, because it doesn’t seem like she’s going to let this drop.”

“Yes, well,” Nedzu says. “I suppose I shall have to.”

Shouta nods, though not entirely mollified, and begins a silent retreat, only to pause again at the door. “And Nedzu?”

“Hm?”

“Shinsou’s doing us a favour. Don’t forget that. The next time he comes to you for help, take him seriously. It’s the least he deserves.”

Shouta’s never been one for sentimentality. But he’s not heartless either.

On Wednesday, he catches sight of Shinsou between classes. He flutters alone past a crowd of students, shoulders hunched and eyes low. Shouta had hardly thought it possible, but the bags beneath the kid’s eyes are even more pronounced than usual.

He can’t help but be reminded of Shinsou’s mother, walking these same halls yesterday, face drawn in tension. He wonders if anything happened between them last night. If she yelled at him, punished him, did anything to make him look as utterly miserable as he does now.

The thought plagues him all day.

So. Shouta's never been one for sentimentality, but on Thursday, when Shinsou slips through the gym doors, instead of a greeting, Shouta cuts straight to the chase. "We've decided to tell your mother. About everything."

And it's—a little strange, frankly. The way watching the tension bleed from Shinsou's shoulders is like an incongruous weight off his own.

"We did? You did?" His mouth works uselessly for a few seconds as he processes, then drops into a clumsy bow. "I mean—thank you, sensei. It's not—Nedzu's not angry, is he?"

"Angry?"

"Because I asked?" Shinsou looks a little sheepish. "I thought I could handle it alone, but she just kept asking so many questions—about cram school, about my grades, about the running—and there wasn't anything I could say to get her to drop it. And then when Maijima called to tell her about the fighting and the talking back she got so—"

"Shinsou."

His mouth snaps shut.

"No one's angry," Shouta sighs. "You're allowed to ask for help. Just not at school, okay? If there's ever another problem, wait to bring it up here."

"Yes, sensei," Shinsou says. "Thank you."

He waits, then prompts, "Is there?"

"Is there what?"

"Another problem?"

"No, no. Everything else is, uh, going fine."

Shouta nods. "Okay then."

"Except—"

Uh huh. There it is. "Except?"

Shinsou fidgets. "Sorry. It's nothing."

“Go on,” Shouta coaxes. “That’s what I’m here for.”

“It’s nothing, really,” Shinsou repeats. “It’s just. On Monday. In the cafeteria.”

“The fight with Midoriya? What about it?”

“When Todoroki had his hand on me,” Shinsou says. “I, uh. I just—froze.”

Shouta waits, but Shinsou’s reticent to continue, eyes low and hands twisted together. “He wasn’t going to hurt you,” he says carefully.

“I know, but, I couldn’t even—” he sighs. Takes a deep breath, and, “Sensei, are there any plans to teach me to fight?”

Again, Shouta has to pause, swallowing back his surprise. “Fight? Shinsou, this isn’t a combat mission.”

“I know, I know,” Shinsou says quickly. His cheeks have turned a pale pink. “It’s just, when I first agreed to do this, I thought maybe...”

“We were going to throw you against the entire League of Villains single-handed?”

The joke works, a little. Shinsou’s lips curl. “No, but. Well, Nedzu said you were a good match for me because you also have a non-combative quirk, and you’ve had to learn to use in combat in order to be a hero.”

“Nedzu said I was good choice because I’ve worked covert missions. Not because of my combat experience.”

“Yeah, I—I guess,” Shinsou admits. “You’re right. I’m sorry. It was stupid.”

Shouta tilts his head, and weighs the thought for a long moment before releasing it with a sigh. “Did you bring your change of clothes?”

Shinsou’s eyes snap up. “Yes?” He bites back a smile, but can’t help the optimism that colours his voice. Still a terrible liar.

Shouta rolls his eyes. “Alright. Go change already.”

He takes off at a near sprint and disappears into the bathroom. Shouta wanders over to the mat in the center of the room while he waits, rolls his shoulders and cracks his neck. God, why is he doing this? He’s

definitely not getting paid for it, that's for sure. He hasn't even *stretched*. But Shinsou's out moments later, breathless and bouncing on the balls of his feet. Shouta nearly rolls his eyes, but then. Well. It's kind of endearing.

He's not *heartless*.

"Physical quirks are statistically most likely to augment close-quarters combat," he begins to recite. "When facing an enemy of this kind, your best option is always to take them out from a distance."

That night, Hitoshi hits the last step to the apartment like he's on the verge of collapse. He bites back a hiss at the brush of his uniform's fabric over every bump and bruise, the ache in his back where he took a particularly hard fall, the way his muscles promise to make their displeasure at his getting his ass-kicked *very* well-known tomorrow morning.

And yet, he feels *fantastic*. Combat training *finally* happened, after weeks of waiting, fantasizing, always being too nervous to ask. The General Ed stream rarely get more than a few quirk-focused Phys Ed lessons per semester, and never have they taught him as much as what he learned from Aizawa in only an *hour*.

Not just Aizawa. *Eraserhead*. A real pro hero.

Hitoshi knows he's grinning like an idiot as he unlocks the front door, but he can't bring himself to stop. There's another reason for his good mood, maybe even more important than the first.

Mom greets him at the table, face pale and shadows harsh under the kitchen light – a miserable sight that's grown all-too-familiar over the past few days. Usually, it makes his heart sink. Tonight though, he takes a seat across from her without having to be asked, takes her hand and lets his penitence bleed through at the touch, and says, "Can we talk?"

Hitoshi explains what he can. Basic details, like the scope of the mission, the fact he's training under Aizawa, the necessity of his role at school. Enough to sate her – to stall out the transfer papers she'd been in the middle of submitting. But the real meeting doesn't happen until Friday.

A text from an unknown number instructs them to go out for dinner at 7:30. It's a part of town Shinsou doesn't know, a restaurant he's never even heard of. Inside, there's a reservation for a private room in the back. They walk together, mom as composed as he's ever seen her. Playing along, for now. Hitoshi's been casting her looks all night, but he can't really get a read on her – if she's worried, confused, enraged. All of the above, probably.

At the door, she strides in without pause.

Nedzu and Aizawa are already inside. They stand and bow in greeting, Nedzu in a tailored suit, Aizawa with his hair neatly tied back. There's no waitstaff. No food or menus on the table either. Just a pen, a non-disclosure contract, and Nedzu's calming smile.

"Mrs. Shinsou. Please, sit. We have a lot to discuss."

Mom listens like there's about to be a quiz, straight-backed and more attentive than Hitoshi's been in class for the past month. Still, the tension pours off her so strong he nearly wants to curl away. He keeps waiting for the other shoe to drop – for mom to snap every time Nedzu mentions his acting out at school, or his training, or worse yet, the League of Villains.

But there's no rage, no shock. Just a careful tilt of her head and a few evenly-worded questions. She asks about dates – how long has this been going on, how long do they foresee it continuing?

"Several weeks more, at least," Nedzu says. "I can't imagine the League of Villains taking a decision like this lightly."

She asks about the specific mission parameters, about Hitoshi's role. What type of direction he's been receiving, what's being expected of him, what measures have been taken to guarantee his safety.

“Shinsou is of course receiving guidance, and is being watched closely by both Aizawa and myself. However, specific decisions regarding his performance both in and outside of school are being left to his discretion.”

She asks Hitoshi only one question. The same one, over and over, every time Nedzu speaks.

“Is this true?”

“Yes,” Hitoshi tells her, every time.

It goes on for almost an hour. In the end, she takes the non-disclosure contract in hand, delicately, as though it might burn to the touch. Silence stretches as she reads it once, then again, then a third time.

She signs it.

Nedzu and Aizawa bow again as they leave. Nedzu thanks her for her patience and understanding. Mom says nothing at all.

Hitoshi catches Aizawa’s eye. Just like in their first meeting, he hasn’t spoken a word this entire time. That doesn’t change, but he does raise a single eyebrow. Gives a small shrug, as if to say, *It’s all you now*.

Back in the car, the silence finally breaks. Hitoshi can’t hold it in anymore.

“So—uh,” he tries awkwardly. “You’re—You’re really... okay with this?”

The words hang in the air with a near-physical weight. Outside, sunlight filters over the skyline, cutting sheets of orange and yellow through the grit of the city air. It illuminates every detail on Mom’s face, every shadow, every wrinkle and crease of worry. When she turns to him, her eyes are glistening wet.

“No.”

Hitoshi’s stomach plummets.

“Not even a *little*, Hitoshi.” She brings her hands to her face. Lowers them. Raises them again, knuckles pressed against her eyes. “Fucking hell. You should have *told me*.”

“I wanted to, mom. I really did.”

“I need to know these kinds of things. This—This—This is crazy. This is *dangerous*, Toshi. And I can’t—” Her breath stutters. “I can’t help you if I don’t even know.”

“Mom....” He grips her hand, feels the storm of conflict within her like his own, but can’t find the words to quell it. “Mom.”

“If you want this, I *need* to be able to help you.” She grips back, and looks at him, hard. “You *do* want this, don’t you?”

“Yes,” he breathes.

“Not because you think you have to? Or—Or because they’ve somehow—*convinced* you this is your only chance?”

“No,” he says quickly. “Mom, no.”

“You *want* to do this?” she asks again. “*You* want to do this?”

“I want to do this. I want this chance. I want to prove myself.” He *needs* to. “And it’s not forever,” he says. “Just until I find the traitor.” Until he’s a real hero. “Until UA’s safe again.”

“I don’t care about any of that. I care about you,” she says. “Hitoshi, if you’re going to do this, it needs to be for the right reasons. Not because you want to prove yourself, not because you think this is your only chance. But because you think it’s the right thing to do.”

Something in his chest lightens, warm with a fire of determination. He struggles for the words – to convince her, to convince *everyone*. He can do this, if they’d all only stop *doubting* him. He *knows* he can do this.

“Please,” is all he can manage. “Mom, please.”

She searches his eyes for another long moment, and finally, concedes with a whisper. “Okay.” She turns away, pulls back her hands to swipe at her eyes, and takes the wheel, white knuckled. “Okay,” she says again, louder now. After a beat, her lips quirk. “God, I knew something was up with you. I just didn’t expect, well. *This*.”

An olive branch. An out. Hitoshi takes it. “Really? How?”

Her smile brightens, a little more solid, a little more real. “You started running. If that’s not a red flag, I don’t know what is. You *hate* running.”

Hitoshi laughs. “It’s not so bad, actually. You get used to it. All of it.”

And for the first time, he means it.

Chapter End Notes

In other news, I would die for Shinsou Haru.

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! I never wanted this fic to be one of those "the kids save the world while the parents are super oblivious" type things. That being said, a lot of you had suspected Shinsou would have to alienate his mom in order to complete the mission, so I'm interested to know what you think of this Hot Take instead.

See you next time <3

Pretty Not Terrible

Chapter Notes

This chapter comes early on the exciting occasion of my flight home being delayed by 26 entire hours.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Things get better, a little.

Well, maybe not all things. The days at school still feel longer than ever, between the disapproving stares during class, and the silences follow him through the halls, and the work piling up from the lessons he's not supposed to look like he's paying attention to. The mornings get colder, the sun slower to creep into the sky each day, and Hitoshi's runs leave him cold with sweat and rushing to catch the train.

But at home, things get better, a little.

Mom puts in a request to work to cut down her hours. She even manages to have dinner waiting for *him* a few times, instead of the other way around. She's not exactly all smiles and good cheer, but she puts in the effort. Still, Hitoshi can see the toll her worry takes, in the set of her shoulders, the way she fidgets when she thinks he isn't looking, the strain in her voice when she says, *Hey kiddo, how was your day?*

Good, Hitoshi tells her, most days. He doesn't mention the stares or the silences, the cold mornings or the days when he's so rushed to be out the door he misses breakfast. *Things are better*, he tells her. *A little.*

The week circles around and finds Shouta in the gym once again, quietly efficient in the by-now routine of drawing the blinds before turning on the lights, dumping his bag in the corner and pushing equipment out of the way. Shinsou's only behind him by a few minutes, looking well-settled into his own routine. He slips in quietly, a shy grin and a small bow when their eyes meet – a sight Shouta's grown to welcome. He even manages something of a smile back.

“How are things at home?”

It's not an unusual question to ask as a teacher. Shouta often inquires something of the sort when a student's grades start to drop or they miss too many classes. But he finds himself watching Shinsou's reaction closer than most, and feels the warmth of his worries eased at the clear voice and unguarded expression with which he responds.

“It's good, sensei. My mom's been very understanding.”

“Glad to hear it.”

And he means it. Shinsou Haru had seemed like a sharp woman, and he's glad to have her on their side. Besides, Shinsou doesn't need any more strife at home, especially considering how much he's already putting up with at school.

Speaking of.

He beckons Shinsou closer and together they sit. Shinsou shows him his homework from the previous week, including a few lines of grammar work he neglected to hand in to Hizashi. It's a little awkward without desks and a chalkboard – they have to sit cross-legged and nearly arm-to-arm, but at least Shinsou produces a sketchbook as a makeshift clipboard to write against.

He listens attentively as Shouta makes corrections and clarifies the questions he couldn't voice during the actual lesson. But as the minute stretch, he begins to twitch, knee bouncing and fingers tapping with an energy Shouta's come to recognize in most of his students.

Shinsou stills at Shouta's pointed look. “Sorry.”

Shouta shakes his head. “Don't be.” They've managed to get through most of the homework anyway. Nedzu had wanted him to use the rest of this session teach Shinsou to decode body language and speech patterns, but suddenly, Shouta's got the impression Shinsou's hoping for something else on the menu. And, well. Nedzu didn't rent them a gym for nothing.

He lowers the notebook. “Alright, geez. Go change already.”

Shinsou doesn't need to be told twice – he takes off at a sprint. If Shouta didn't know any better, he'd say the kid's even more excited than he was before last week's ass-kicking.

If he's honest with himself, Shouta'd already been planning to skip the lesson plan this week anyway. What Nedzu doesn't know won't hurt him. Besides, he's been wanting to do more quirk training with Shinsou for a while now. There's still so much they don't know. But more importantly, there's plenty they *do* know and haven't gotten a chance to strengthen. A quirk is like muscle – without recurrent use, it atrophies.

He'd love to best able to test Shinsou's ability to control multiple people at once, but considering the current circumstances, he'll take what he can get. Shouta doesn't mind using himself as the guinea pig. Notwithstanding the initial disorientation and the missing time, being brainwashed really wasn't so bad. And whatever small discomfort he felt was more than worth it to see Shinsou succeed, to see him test his limits, to let him know he was *allowed*.

But he only has to look at Shinsou's eager expression as he emerges from the locker room to know what he really wants. What new students *always* want. Combat training.

Shouta sighs. So maybe he could have used a lesson plan after all. They've got a lot to get through.

Half an hour and several face-plants later, Shouta's got a pretty good idea of the level of dexterity a brainwashed person can exhibit. Shinsou, thankfully, doesn't seem to have to know the specifics of how to perform a task himself in order to make someone else do it – so long as the brainwashed person would normally be able to do it, no specific instructions are required. They've been testing it out with some of Shouta's more advanced weapon maneuvers. The usual reflexes aren't quite all there – a few particularly dizzying mishaps resulted in him waking to find himself tangled in the rafters—once so badly it took Shinsou climbing up to help pull him down—but for the most part, it's passable.

There's more he's still itching to test, but they're limited in their space. So instead, Shouta switches gears. He walks Shinsou through a brief repeat of last week's lesson, repeating all the forms – basic blocks and defensive maneuvers, mostly useful for melee combat. Not that he expects Shinsou to need them any time soon, but it never hurts to be prepared.

“Most emitter-type quirks emanate from limbs, usually hands,” Aizawa says, once they’re ready to move on. “If you happen to know the villain’s dominant hand, you can be pretty sure their quirk’s stronger there too. Greater range, longer time the emission can be sustained. That type of thing.”

Shinsou nods. He looks like he’d be writing this all down if he could.

“In hand-to-hand, subduing a villain like this is difficult. Use your terrain. If you can, block them into a small space. They’ll have a harder time using their quirk without hurting themselves too.”

“Yes, sensei.”

“Ideally,” he adds, “without *you* in that same space. Never use yourself as bait – it’s not worth it. If all else fails, evacuate and wait for back up.” A lesson he *really* wishes a certain chronically-broken-armed 1-A student would learn by now. “Seriously. Do everything you can not to get yourself hurt. It gets old.”

“Don’t be Midoriya,” Shinsou translates. “Got it.”

For a kid with no prior training to speak of, Shinsou’s pretty... not terrible, all things considered. He’s clearly been keeping up with his runs – the spike in his endurance level is commendable, even after only a few weeks. And what he still lacks in skill and physical capability, he more than makes up for in dedication.

Still, Shouta thinks, he’ll need some sort of tech to help balance what he lacks – namely, effective long-distance combat options. Shouta can already picture it – something for blocking or containment. Maybe with repulsors? That way it could be used offensively or defensively.

Regardless, he’ll need *something*, if he wants any hope of keeping up with the others heroes-in-training his age.

The thought strikes a particular sort of discord. He pictures his class roster. On the one hand, there isn’t a single student in 1-A who couldn’t kick Shinsou’s ass in a physical match. On the other, Shouta can’t help but feel the kid would somehow fit in surprisingly well. More than once over the past few weeks, he’s nearly forgotten Shinsou *isn’t* one of his; he keeps accidentally planning exercises with Shinsou in mind, or dividing the class for groupwork and instinctively accounting for an additional seat.

And it’s. A little disappointing, each time he remembers.

He's distracted, Shouta realizes belatedly. Like, *stupidly* distracted. His blocks have slowed mid-spar, and Shinsou snakes close enough to get in a hit that has him adjusting for balance.

Okay. He retracts an earlier thought. Shinsou could *maybe* give Aoyama a run for his money.

They do a few more quick sets, Shouta faster now and laser-focused. He won't be doing the kid any favours by half-assing the training.

Shinsou's on the defensive now – he can hardly get a step forward, but still successfully manages to block almost every punch, and only falls for one of the feints. Shouta lowers his center, slips inside Shinsou's skinny-armed reach and strikes with the heel of his palm. Shinsou evades but his footing's all wrong – he goes sprawling backwards.

Shouta gives him space to fall. He's even about to offer a hand before Shinsou rolls into a crouch, fists raised and elbows in. He straightens hastily when he sees they're not in combat anymore, cheeks flushed.

Even some of the 1-A kids still make the mistake of thinking the fight's over as soon as they get knocked down. "Huh." Shouta tilts his head. "Good job."

Shinsou ducks his head. "I fell."

"Yeah," he shrugs. "We'll work on it."

Shinsou smiles. Just a second, before he schools his expression back to focused. But the sight does something funny to Shouta's throat. It's— nice. He always looks so *miserable* in the halls.

"Again?" Shinsou asks.

Shouta nods. "Again."

So they reset. And when Shinsou falls, they reset again. Shouta doesn't let up, but makes sure to tell him *good job* another three times throughout the session. He's not being soft either – Shinsou earns them. But.

It's also just nice to see him smile.

With so much to get through, they run a little over time. In the end, Shouta tells him not to worry about wiping down the mat or reorienting the equipment, and does so himself. Shinsou changes in a

hurry, with time only for a quick “Thank you, sensei,” before he bolts out the door.

Shouta finishes cleaning alone, so it’s not until he’s collected his bag and coat that he catches sight of what remains in the corner of the room where they’d first sat. A sketchbook. The one they’d used to write against.

He stoops to pick it up, straightens and flips it from hand to hand, and almost without thought, finds himself leafing through the pages. He sees the stray cats that live behind the train station bakery. He sees Shinsou’s mother, head tipped back in laughter. He sees a few pages that have been torn out, creases and tears where the image has been completely erased or scratched out. He sees a few half-finished sketches, faces and hands in different sizes and angles.

And then he sees himself.

In his hero costume, with his goggles. In his sleeping bag, hair loose around his shoulders. He sees his face, detailed and sharp, jaw shaded with stubble and eyes hard. He sees himself scowling, and next to it, smiling.

He sees them, and. They’re *good*. Really good.

And also terrible.

Idiotic. *Reckless*. If the traitor found these, it could blow Shinsou’s whole cover. It could ruin everything. An absolutely unnecessary risk. Shouta would be doing them all a favour if he destroyed the whole book right now, along with every scrap of damning evidence inside.

But. They’re *really* good.

“Aw, fuck me.”

He hefts his bag over his shoulder and hits the lights, and is already half way down the hall before he even registers where he’s going. He’s at least got the good sense not to go chasing Shinsou through the halls of Jōshubi. It’s almost 6:30 now and they’ll be teeming with students as the evening lets out. Instead, he takes the stairwell down to street level, finds an inconspicuous stoop a block down the street, and waits.

It’s only a minute later when the doors open. Students come flooding out, Shinsou in the middle of the crowd with his head ducked low, hidden in plain sight, exactly as he should be. No one gives the

shabby-haired old guy on the curb a second glance, meaning it's simple work to follow Shinsou from a few paces back until the crowd thins.

The second Shinsou's alone, he moves to intercept

Shinsou startles, stumbling to a stop. His eyes go wide, then wider still when he registers who's got him by the elbow.

"Relax," Shouta says, voice low, and hands him the book. "Don't tense up."

Shinsou stares down at the book for a full second before he scrambles to shove it in his bag, stammering out something that might be an apology, face bright red.

Embarrassment, of course. Panic too, Shouta notes, tracking the kid's gaze falling to his feet. Probably wondering if Shouta saw the pictures. Probably wondering if he's in trouble.

And—

His hand lands on Shinsou's shoulder. It's a bizarre and entirely unplanned gesture – instinctive and intimate, born out of some absurd desire to smooth away Shinsou's worry. Because he thinks he's in trouble. And. That's not right.

"Aizawa?"

A voice from behind freezes him in place. Shinsou's gaze leaps up, locks with Shouta's in shared horror.

"Ah, it is you!" The voice moves closer, cheery and bright behind what sounds like a chain-smoker's lungs. "What are you doing on this side of town?"

Shouta tears his hand from Shinsou's shoulder like it burns. They can't be seen in public. That was the mission – they can't have contact, can't be seen together. That was the *first rule*.

But the damage is already done.

Shouta turns, and standing not six feet away, is the unmistakable sight of Toshinori Yagi.

Chapter End Notes

On a bright note, the wonderful, talented, and generous Ashley Rowan over on tumblr made me an Art and I was so happy I cried. Please have a look at it and leave them some love [here!](#)

A Protégé

Chapter Notes

This chapter is so short and I mcfreakin apologize. I would have posted it way earlier but finals season got! me! dying!

The next chapter will probably be a bit of a wait too (dying!!!!) but once I get through these next few weeks I am home free.

Enjoy some Dad Might POV <3

Aizawa has never exactly been a social butterfly.

Toshinori had hardly known of the man before he started at UA. They'd only met a few times over the years, in passing at various industry functions, and their vastly different skill sets had meant they'd never worked together in the field either. Even after he'd started teaching, it took a while for things to warm up between them. Toshinori hadn't minded. He'd always admired Aizawa's reserved temper—a blessing and a rarity, in their line of work.

Once assigned 1-A together, they'd begun to grow closer, even recently going as far as to share meals and drinks after a few particularly long days. Toshinori didn't know if *friend* was exactly the right word—maybe not yet, anyway—but Aizawa was smart and capable and a damn good teacher, and he'd always respected him. The fact that he made good company helped all the more.

Which was why, ever since the start of second term, he's been a little disheartened at how infrequently they've seen each other. Toshinori doesn't pretend to know everything that's going on in Aizawa's personal life, and he certainly isn't planning to pry, but *has* noticed that suddenly, the man seems remarkably busy. The first week of the term, Toshinori had hardly caught a glimpse of him—he'd always been running off the second classes ended, and even showing up late some mornings as well.

These days, things seem to have calmed down a bit. Now, Aizawa's usually around for a few hours after classes, though apparently never long enough to accept Toshinori's offer to go out for drinks again.

So, it's to his tremendous surprise when that evening, on his way home from the market, Toshinori stumbles upon the elusive man in question, who, not three hours earlier, blew past him in the teacher's

lounge with a, “Gotta run, sorry.”

“Aizawa?” Toshinori hefts his bags when they slide down his too-thin arms and quickens his step. Aizawa doesn’t respond, doesn’t even turned to look his way, but the closer he gets, the clearer he is. “Ah, it is you! What are you doing on this side of town?”

It’s another moment still before Aizawa turns, and another moment more before Toshinori realizes—he’s not alone. He’s with a young boy. A student?

He might be a newbie teacher, but he’s done his due diligence of learning as many names as possible, trying to meet the UA standard of making all their students feel safe and welcomed. Even the General Education stream, with whom he has little to no contact, are still, in some capacity, his students, and thus his responsibility. But diligence notwithstanding, this is a face he’d know anywhere. After all, it never escaped him for a second how close Young Midoriya was to losing his first round at the Sports Festival.

“Young Shinsou? Ah, how nice to see you. Both,” he adds after a pause, smile stretched wide, awaiting a reflection.

He receives nothing of the sort. Instead, something very strange happens.

Toshinori’s used to a variety of reactions when students first meet him. There’s the usual surprise, awe and speechlessness and star-struck embarrassment. But even since wasting away to his emaciated form, he’s never seen anything quite like—this.

Shinsou goes sheet-white, mouth frozen shut. His eyes flicker, stunned wide and caught in rapid calculation between Toshinori and Aizawa, like there’s some tangle of invisible thread he’s trying to shake loose. He takes a halting step back.

Aizawa’s face is a different story—expression of stone and eyes inscrutable. He spares only a single glance for Toshinori before he turns back to Shinsou. “I’ll handle it. Go home.”

For a second, the boy doesn’t move. His eyes jump over Toshinori a final time before he tears himself away. There’s no bow, no goodbye. He just spins on his heel and walks away, shoulders hunched and head ducked, like he might slip into the crowd and out of existence.

The sight sends something strange and heavy sinking through him. If

he didn't know any better, he'd say Shinsou had looked. Scared.

Aizawa faces him at last, eyes narrowed and assessing, as though staring down a dangerous criminal, and Toshinori's pleasant grin cracks.

What exactly did he just walk in on?

"Uh," he says. "Hello?"

Aizawa moves so quick Toshinori nearly flinches—the grocery bags are out of his hands and in Aizawa's before he can even react.

"Heading home? I'll walk you."

"Huh?" It's a moment before the words catch up. "What? No, it's fine, I don't—"

Aizawa pins him with a cool stare. "Toshinori. Let me walk you home." It's not a request.

Toshinori hesitates only another second, but the cold fury behind Aizawa's careful mask leave little room for debate. It's a short walk to his house, made shorter by Aizawa's purposeful pace, which Toshinori nearly has to jog to keep up with. Aizawa doesn't speak, and Toshinori takes cue, swallows the questions swirling his in mind and doesn't push. Not yet. Months of working alongside Aizawa have made it clear when the other man needs a moment to gather his thoughts.

So they walk. And finally, when they round the corner to his empty street, Aizawa slows.

"You can't tell anyone what you just saw."

Toshinori nods. He'd figured as much. Still, he can't help but ask, "What exactly *did* I just see?"

"Shinsou Hitoshi and me."

"Right." He lets the syllable drag. "Why?"

There's a weighted pause. "I'm—training him."

Toshinori blinks, and suddenly, the world takes a brighter hue. Aizawa has a *protégé*? "Ah! That's wonderful news! He must be so excited!"

He needn't think of Young Midoriya for more than a second before he

feels the familiar glow of pride wash through him. He thinks of the boy's achievements, the warmth with which his heart swells at every step he takes closer to his dream, and says, "You must be excited too!"

But Aizawa doesn't look excited. His expression is pinched, almost pained. "I'm training him in secret."

"You're—what?" His brows furrow. "Why?"

"It's a secret assignment. I can't tell you."

"Wait!" Toshinori gasps. "Is he joining the Hero Course?" He'll need to begin making preparations if that's the case. Selecting teams for group training is already difficult enough in a class with such a diverse skillset—it'll be even harder with an uneven number of students.

Aizawa cuts the mental calculations short. "No, he isn't. And *quiet down*. We shouldn't be talking about this."

They're nearing the stoop of his apartment, but Aizawa doesn't slow and neither do Toshinori's thoughts. Why would Aizawa be training a Gen Ed student in *secret*? Perhaps he's planning to participate in the Provisional License exam? That is coming up in a few weeks. He opens his mouth to ask as much but—

"Stop talking," Aizawa says. Narrowed eyes land on a young couple mingling on the fire escape. It's a look Toshinori recognizes.

Well. Secret assignment indeed.

His chest gives a bitter twist. He hadn't known losing his spot as Number One hero would mean such a quick fallout from the need-to-know circles.

He swallows the feeling down. Unconventional methods or not, he's happy for Aizawa. Becoming a mentor to Young Midoriya was one of the best decisions Toshinori ever made. Fighting All for One, losing his powers—it's all been made worth it just to watch the boy grow stronger each day. Whatever his relationship with Shinsou, he hopes the sentiment is shared by Aizawa.

Toshinori keeps this to himself, and lets Aizawa walk him all the way to the front door. Retrieving his keys, he raises his eyebrows in silent invitation, but Aizawa shakes his head and at last hands over the groceries. Places to go, pupils to train.

“It was good to see you,” Toshinori says, and means it. “You should stop by sometime, when you’re less—busy.”

Aizawa hums noncommittally.

“And—Good luck.”

The stoic expression flickers. “Yeah,” Aizawa says haltingly. “You too.”

It’s a few days before Toshinori sees Shinsou again.

He’s in the halls, having just delivered 1-A to the cafeteria after a training session that ran perhaps a little too long into their lunch period. He and Aizawa are on the way back to the teacher’s lounge, entertaining hopes of scarfing down a quick meal before their next class. Toshinori falls back as they walk, eyes on his phone as he gives his email and cursory check. When he raises them, it’s to the sight of a familiar figure emerging from the stairwell.

“Young Shinsou,” he beams. “How are you, my boy?”

Shinsou startles as though attacked, nearly stumbles back into the wall in a maneuver not unlike a cornered animal. His eyes flit once over Toshinori’s shoulder, and when he turns instinctively to trace the gaze, he’s met with Aizawa swooping down on them like a bird of prey.

When Toshinori looks back, Shinsou’s already gone.

“What are you doing?” Aizawa hisses, a hand clawed around his arm to drag him back. “No, don’t answer that. Don’t talk to him. Just—don’t.”

Toshinori pulls away. “What’s going on? I thought you were tr—”

Aizawa actually puts a *hand* over his *mouth*. “In secret,” he breathes. “I made that *very* clear.”

Aizawa holds him until he’s sure Toshinori’s silence will last, then finally lets him wrench away. But his cold stare continues to pin him. All at once, the whole situation exudes the keen aura of *wrong*. What

was with Shinsou's expression? That's twice now that the boy looked like he'd rather die than speak to Toshinori for more than a second. It's enough to shake him. He may be a skeleton of the impressive figure he used to fill, but he's still *All Might*.

Then again, this is Eraserhead. This is Shouta. He never does anything without a good reason. He's a hero, he's a friend. And strange impressions or not, Toshinori trusts him.

He deflates. "Okay."

Aizawa searches him over like he doesn't quite believe it. It's another moment before he too seems to loosen, posture carefully casual, and spins on his heel to continue the walk to the teacher's lounge.

Toshinori watches him go. He trusts him. Of course he does.

"All Might!"

Toshinori startles as Midoriya skids to a stop at his side, breathless, like he ran all the way from the cafeteria.

He clears his throat. "What is it, my boy?"

"I was wondering about my performance in that exercise today. About some things I could have done better." He fidgets. "Do you think we could, um, go over it?"

"Of course," he says without pause. That's right—Midoriya was able to utilise the Full Cowl technique in hand-to-hand for the first time today. He'd have brought it up himself later, but he can't say that he's not pleased to see the boy's still actively looking for his advice. Powers or not, he has a duty to help him succeed, any way he can.

"Thank you!" Midoriya grins and gives a small bow, and Toshinori can't help a smile back.

"Come to my office," he says. "We can talk in private there."

He supposes Aizawa's not the only one with secrets.

My Partner

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for being so patient with me while real life kicked my ass. Your kudos and comments, as always, were like a balm for my soul.

Hitoshi shifts on restless feet. The shuttered gym doors stand before him, thin shards of light leaking through the slats of the blinds. Aizawa's in there, somewhere, setting up, waiting.

Hitoshi lifts his hand to the handle. Drops it. Shifts his feet again.

Last week was the closest he's come so to blowing the mission so far—and thanks to *All Might* no less. Since the incident in the hallway, he's done everything he can to avoid the man at all costs, going as far as to duck into empty classrooms and hide out in bathroom stalls when he spots him coming—a much harder task these days than it used to be, with the man so much smaller and not nearly as easy to pick out of the crowd.

That's twice now that Aizawa's had to save his ass. Twice now that Aizawa's seen him freeze up under pressure. Twice now that he's nearly ruined everything. Not to mention all the dumb sketches Aizawa maybeprobablydefinitely saw. He closes his eyes against the wash of embarrassment that accompanies the thought. That sketchbook was practically a *love letter* to Eraserhead. Now, it sits shredded in the bottom of his apartment's dumpster.

God. He can't believe he was such a fucking idiot.

But hiding out here like a coward isn't going to fix the matter, and certainly isn't going to win him any good favour. Aizawa probably already thinks him enough of an idiot—best not to give him any more fodder.

Hitoshi straightens himself out, piece by piece. He opens the door.

As expected, Aizawa's cross-legged on the floor inside, and as expected, he skips the formalities. But what comes out of his mouth instead isn't expected at all.

"I owe you an apology."

The door clicks shut. Hitoshi doesn't move. "Huh?"

Aizawa's face does a funny little twist, like the words taste too bitter to bear repeating. He pats the ground instead. "Come sit."

Hitoshi moves forward cautiously.

"I took an unnecessary risk last week. If I hadn't followed you, we never would have run in to All Might." Aizawa pauses, inclines his head. "I'm sorry."

Hitoshi's ass hits the ground hard enough to make his ears ring. Sorry. Aizawa's sorry. Aizawa's not angry.

"Shinsou?"

"Yeah," he startles out. "Yeah, of course. It's fine." And wow, it feels *weird* saying those words to a teacher. To a *pro hero*. As though Shinsou's somehow the governing authority here, the one with benedictions to dole out. "I mean—It *was* fine, right? He didn't—suspect anything?"

Aizawa tips a hand in a *yes-and-no* motion. "I had to tell him something. So I told him the truth."

"The truth?"

"Part of it, anyway. The part about training you. The rest is need-to-know basis." There's the hint of a grin, gone like a flash. A secret of their own. "Speaking of, let's keep this incident between you and me, yeah? What Nedzu doesn't know won't hurt him. I know he said the traitor could be anyone, but let's face it. *All Might*?"

There's a tug on the corners of his lips. "I dunno, sensei. I've always thought the way he unequivocally devoted his life to fighting evil *was* a little suspicious."

"Hm, you might be on to something," Aizawa says gravely. "I think we've found our traitor."

The deadpan voice and severe expression are too much. Hitoshi ducks his head, shoulders shaking in silent laughter. Aizawa's eyes glimmer with warmth. He waits for Hitoshi to settle, then continues, "Jokes aside, we need to be careful. It's been a few weeks now, and you're bound to have at least piqued the traitor's interest. With any luck, they'll be watching you even closer moving forward."

This sticks with Hitoshi for the rest of the session. It *has* been a while—it's almost November, and he's yet to have been approached by anyone. Everyone at school avoids him like the plague, and there's a nagging voice in the back of his mind that says it may never end, that the plan won't work, that it's his fault. But as always, all Aizawa has to say on the subject is to be play his part and follow his routine.

And so, he does.

He wakes early. He runs. And while it's not quite as torturous as it used to be, the mornings grow colder and darker, and Hitoshi's nerves grow with them.

Everyone's calling for an unseasonably brutal winter. By the time the next Thursday rolls around, UA's alight with excited chatter about the dust of snow which already coats campus's green fields white and has students begging their teachers for indoor Phys Ed.

It's beginning to melt by the time the day lets out, but not enough to prevent Hitoshi's shoes from soaking through as he cuts across the yard on his way to Jōshubi. He's more than halfway across when he realizes the risk of tracking mud through the halls—like a map for any would-be prying eyes directly to his secret meeting with Aizawa.

With a sigh, he doubles back, all the way inside and to his locker, and grabs his indoor shoes. Better safe than sorry. Or some shit.

Back outside, he keeps his eyes down and steps careful, retracing his old footprints where the snow is already packed down in the hopes of avoiding another sock-full of snow.

Which is when he notices the second set of prints beside his own. They follow all the way to where he doubled back, then lead out onto the road, disappearing where the sidewalks have already melted clean.

Huh. He doesn't remember seeing anyone cutting across the field when he turned around, and he wasn't inside long enough for anyone to make it across unless they were in a serious rush.

Then again, maybe someone *was* in a rush. Maybe he just didn't notice. Maybe it's nothing. But.

Better safe than sorry.

When he hits the street, he unravels the tangle of earbuds from his pocket, slides them in and doesn't play any music. He keeps walking.

And walking. Cars and crowded buses rumble past, but the sidewalks are sparse in avoidance of the cold. Behind him, shoes scuff.

He doesn't turn around. He doesn't have to. He's being followed.

Heart like thunder, he keeps his steps light and his shoulders low, checks the time on his phone while pretending to change the song. Training starts in ten minutes.

He doesn't go to Jōshubi.

Instead, he finds the closest convenience store, swaggers inside and stands in the snack aisle while the owner watches with a wary eye from behind the counter. That's right, he thinks, and openly scowls back. Better pay close attention, there's a delinquent in your store.

He doesn't buy anything, but watches the parking lot through the gaps in the shelves and the ripped edges of the ads curling off the windows. He watches and watches, but no one comes in. Eventually, his pulse settles. The heat of the store sets over him and he starts to sweat under his coat. Training started fifteen minutes ago, and no one comes in.

At the front, a woman pays for a stack of lottery tickets. While the owner's back is turned, Hitoshi pockets a lighter and pack of cigarettes from the dispenser, then slips outside.

He stands in an empty strip-mall parking lot down the street. Fiddles with the pack in his hands and tries to look like he knows what he's doing when he pulls one out and lights it up. The parking lot lights flicker on overhead—the sun is starting to set. His fingers are cold, the fog of his breath mingling with the smoke, earbuds in and painfully silent. Training started half an hour ago, and Hitoshi is starting to feel like the world's biggest idiot.

He waits and he waits and he waits, just to be sure. The paranoia drains away to let in the cold, and finally, he swallows his pride and the sting of embarrassment and walks home. The streets are silent behind him.

He sleeps like shit, and no amount of 1AM algebra homework can take

his mind off the reason why.

What kind of hero lets their paranoia get the best of them like that? Not only did he skip a lesson, but he skipped a lesson after *specifically* asking Aizawa to train him. He wasted everyone's time, and he's got nothing to show for it.

He half expects Aizawa to ream him out the next time they see each other, but of course, on Friday, nothing of the sort happens. Aizawa's got an appearance to keep up too—he effortlessly avoids Hitoshi's pathetic attempts to make eye contact in the hall, and somehow, it's even worse than usual.

He knows, objectively, it's part of the act, but a small voice keeps telling him it's punishment. A punishment he has to bear alone this time—he can't go tramping into Nedzu's office to explain himself like before. Nedzu made it clear there was to be no more of that, and besides, if he really *was* being followed yesterday, then Aizawa was right—they need to be more careful now than ever. For all he knows, he could be under the microscope right now.

And so he keeps telling himself, all throughout the next week—throughout the glares from his classmates and the reprimands from his teachers and the heart-pounding silences as Aizawa strides past him in the halls.

He's vigilant on his walks to cram school. He skips again Tuesday, just so last Thursday doesn't seem like a one-time fluke. But he's never approached by anyone on the street, never so much as even spared a glance. So, with a churning stomach of nerves, he convinces himself it's safe to make the trek on Thursday.

He nearly expects Aizawa not to be there, as some sort of retribution for his no-show last week, but when he slips into the room, Aizawa's cross-legged on the floor, grading papers as casual as ever.

Hitoshi drops into a bow so low his head nearly cracks the ground. "I'm so sorry, sensei."

A rustle of paper as Aizawa turns a page. "Why?"

Why? He half-straightens "I—I skipped last week."

"I know," Aizawa says. "Why?"

"I, uh. I thought I was. Being followed," Hitoshi says lamely, and waits

for judgement to be delivered.

Aizawa just tilts his head. “And were you?”

“I don’t know,” Hitoshi admits. “They didn’t—I never—I don’t know.” He bows again, for good measure.

There’s a long pause. Then, a sigh. “Get up. I’m not angry.”

“You’re... not?”

“No,” Aizawa says. “If anything, you’ve acted more discreetly than I have.”

“I—Really?”

“Really. Now, get over here.”

“I could have sworn I could hear them,” he explains as he comes to sit in front of Aizawa. “I never saw them though.”

Aizawa nods in thought. There’s no judgement on his face, but Hitoshi can’t help but feel like he still owes a better explanation. “I was probably just being paranoid,” he mumbles, embarrassed.

“Better paranoid than careless,” Aizawa shrugs. “Plus, I’m not exactly taking attendance here.”

“But you really weren’t mad?” he can’t help but ask. “Not even in the moment?”

Aizawa shrugs. “I can’t say I was pleased, but I suspected you had a reason.” He fixes Hitoshi with a long look. “This isn’t school, Shinsou. I’m not just here to tell you what to do. You’re my student, but you’re also my partner. If you make a call, I have to trust it, even if I don’t like it.”

It’s not exactly a rousing declaration of support, but it’s said with enough conviction to steal his breath. “Oh,” he manages, stupidly.

Thankfully, Aizawa doesn’t seem to expect much else. “You made the right call. If you really are being scoped out, we may need to change things up. I’ll report to Nedzu tomorrow and see what he says.”

“We can keep training though, right?” he asks quickly, and tries not to let the dejection show when Aizawa visibly hesitates.

His eyes soften. “Yeah,” he says at length. “We can keep training. *But* —” he snaps out a hand, “—don’t think I won’t work you twice as hard for skipping last week.” He stands in one fluid motion. “Come on, up. Combat training. And I’m not going easy on you.”

Hitoshi springs to his feet, grin splitting wide. “Yes, sir.”

“What did you even end up doing last week? Practice at home?”

“No, I—uh. I stole some smokes.”

Aizawa arches an eyebrow, and somehow, it’s the closest he’s ever looked to being impressed. “Brand?”

“I don’t know. The first one I saw.” He pulls his bag around and rummages through until he finds them. The box reads, in tacky block letters, *Sprint!*

Aizawa takes them in hand and gives a huff. “These are trash. Next time get the Mevius ones. Red box, king size. It’s what all the cool kids are smoking these days.”

Hitoshi can’t help but laugh. He never thought he’d see the day when a *teacher* gave him smoking advice. “Wow, thanks, sensei.” He makes a grab for the pack so he can return it to his bag, but Aizawa holds it up and out of his reach.

“Now, what kind of role model would I be if I let you keep these?”

He laughs again and holds up his hands in surrender. But as he watches Aizawa tuck them carefully into his pocket, he has the sneaking suspicion it’s less about the ethics and more that the man just wanted to bum free smokes.

“Now,” Aizawa says, “About that combat training.”

The next day, Shouta’s early enough to work that the parking lot is still barren, blanketed in a layer of last night’s frost. He locks his car with jittery fingers, itching and eager for a mug of something warm. He forgoes the lounge and the sweet promises of the coffee machine, and instead cuts a quick route to the office of the one person he can always count on being there even earlier than him.

Shinsou might not have their identity yet, but there's no doubt in Shouta's mind. Last week, the traitor made first contact, whether they intended to or not.

He wasn't lying when he said he hadn't been mad about the no-show last week, but he had been worried. Even now, despite everything for once going according to plan, the feeling hasn't abated. The League is supposed to be interested in Shinsou. That's a *good* thing. He knows that.

Still, now that they finally have confirmation, now that it's finally *real*, he can't help but envision every possible way it could go wrong. Even the smallest slip-up could blow their whole cover. And more likely than not, Shinsou will be the one taking the brunt of that fall.

Inside Nedzu's office, Shouta gives his report in clinical detail, sure to leave out those particular misgivings. He's hardly begun before the smile threatens to split Nedzu's face, and by the time he's finished, the man looks about ready to jump for joy.

"Well *done*, Aizawa. If what Shinsou believes is true, it's only a matter of time now before we have our traitor brought to light."

Shouta inclines his head, accepting the praise, but Nedzu must be expecting something else, because the smile gives way to a curious tilt. "Aizawa?"

There's a beat of hesitation, but ultimately, Shouta knows better than to try to hide things like this from Nedzu. "I'm just—worried about him."

"Oh?" Nedzu asks. "You don't think he can do it?"

"No," Shouta says quickly. "He can definitely do it." It's not the first time he's had the thought, but it's certainly the first time he's put it to words. And therein lies the crux of his concern. Shinsou can do it. He *will*—Shouta has no doubt.

It's everything after that's still unknown.

"I'm just worried," he finally says.

"You needn't be," Nedzu says. His voice is low, soft but sure-footed. A calming tactic Shouta knows well, but damn if it doesn't work. Nedzu's all smiles again. "We're close now. With luck, this will all be over soon."

“I know,” Shouta says. But luck or not, this thing doesn’t end the moment they find the traitor. And even then, he thinks, what about Shinsou? A reputation like the one he’s built doesn’t disappear overnight, and neither does the hunger for approval a mission like this stokes. The mission is nearing an end, one way or another. But what happens next?

Something Incredible

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

In the morning, Hitoshi hits *snooze* on his alarm three times before finally managing to drag himself out of bed. He's upright for only a second before the ache from last night's training makes itself known. A hot shower would probably do wonders, but if he postpones his run any longer, the sun's gonna beat him out. Stick to the schedule, and all that.

The chill hits like slap to the face, and the layer of frost on the fire escape all but kills him on the way down. The roads are no better—he's forced to tread more carefully than usual, and knows his time's going to be shit for it. At least it's quiet. Last night was the coldest of the year so far, and everyone seems to be sleeping late in recovery. After a few minutes the streetlights finally flicker off, leaving the sidewalks gloomy under the fog, identical apartment buildings quiet like they've frozen in the night, flawlessly depressing in a way only middle-class suburbia could manage.

He makes a loop of the block, rounding the final corner—the road ahead even gloomier for being a dead-end—when his feet go out from beneath him. He shouts, but there's no ice, no hard snow to break his fall, just the lurch of his stomach through empty air, then—

He lands on his ass.

Except. It's soft. Padded? His gaze skips about wildly but there's nothing to latch onto. Just darkness—the world shrouded in a black cloud. He can't see. His throat constricts and he gasps, he can't *see*—

Until suddenly, he can.

The fog dissipates in a single breath, and he's—inside? It's still freezing though—his breath visible before him—and when he looks past it, he sees why. The walls are flimsy wooden planks, thin strips of morning light seeping through the spaces like shuttered blinds. His hands fist into the padding beneath him. Straw, or—hay, he realizes. He's in a *barn*.

So consumed is he in parsing the clues of his surroundings, he fails to see what stands directly before him until it moves. A man, or—

something like one. A shadowed figure in a neat suit, a face—if it can even be called that—he’s seen countless times in shaky news reels and police sketches. *If you see this man contact your local heroes immediately*

“Good morning,” says Kurogiri, the second-in-command of the League of Villains.

His heart leaps as though in flight from his body, nausea tight in his throat. Hitoshi stares, frozen still while his mind tears off in a dozen directions, key among them, like a lifeline, is training, training, *remember your fucking training—*

Is he scared? Should he show it? That’s the natural reaction, right? But not too scared, Nedzu said. He needs to seem—uh, uh, capable. Right? But how is he supposed to do that? And—*fuck*, fuck fuck fuck, he’s been thinking for way too long, and Kurogiri is still looking at him, still waiting for an answer and—

“Um,” Hitoshi manages.

“I apologize for my rather inelegant means of contacting you,” Kurogiri continues smoothly. “I hoped we could speak in private.”

Belatedly, Hitoshi scrambles to his feet, thinking it might put them at eye level, but under the shadows, the black cloud leaking off Kurogiri’s form nearly licks the ceiling. “Who are you?” he demands. “Where am I?”

“Of course, you have many questions.” Kurogiri tips his head and the fog flickers with the movement. “But I believe you already know the answer to your first.”

He doesn’t deny it. He doesn’t have to—he’s got what he needed. An answer. The power of his quirk layers like honey on his tongue, sweetening the cold chill of the air. His fingers itch with adrenaline, but this isn’t a fight, and it doesn’t have to be. He swallows down the pound of his heart, and holds his quirk still.

“As I thought,” Kurogiri says. “We haven’t much time, so if you’ll excuse my boldness, allow me to skip the introductions. Shinsou, I would like to offer you a business proposal.”

He shifts, tilts his head—a feigned curiosity that parrots Kurogiri’s own stance. “Oh?”

“Please listen carefully—very few people are lucky enough to hear this. Firstly, you have my word that neither I nor my associates will hurt you unless given reason. That being said, I’d think wisely before trying anything heroic.”

It’s impossible read his face—not in the least because he barely seems to have one. But the wording leaves little room for misinterpretation. Kurogiri’s not alone. And without a response from his *associates*, Hitoshi’s all but powerless. The sweetness slips from the air, the cold bitter against the back of his throat. His gaze darts across the shadows before he can stop himself, searching for the threat. Kurogiri doesn’t react, but Hitoshi knows he sees it—the fear. And he *is* scared—he doesn’t know what he was thinking, that it would be that easy, that someone like Kurogiri wouldn’t have backup.

He forces out a breath, watches the unsteady fog of it scatter in the air. Scared or not, outnumbered or not—this isn’t a fight, he reminds himself. It’s just another part of the job. He’s got this far, hasn’t he?

“Heroic, huh? Don’t worry, UA’s made it plenty clear—I couldn’t be a hero if I *wanted* to. Not with a quirk like mine.”

Kurogiri hums. “In that case, this might be easier than I thought.” There’s a smile in his voice, a pleasant lilt like an old accent Hitoshi can’t quite place. “Shinsou, I’d like to extend to you, on the behalf of the League of Villains, a declaration of sympathy. You see, we believe it would be in your interest to allow us to help cultivate your true capabilities.”

The admission steals his breath. Yes, *yes*, okay, yes, he can work with this, he *can* work with this. Months of sneaking around, of watching over his shoulder, of shameless public outbursts and long, lonely nights, of lessons and secrets and lies and lies and *lies*. All for this.

Hitoshi could *scream*. Instead, he barely lets his interest colour his voice. “My true capabilities?”

“UA has never been the right place for you,” Kurogiri says gravely. “You’ve always known this, haven’t you? You’ve always felt you haven’t belonged. As with many, they have failed to see your capacity for greatness. You are nothing to them, Shinsou. To us, however, you hold a wealth of untapped potential.”

“You want to recruit me then?” he urges. “Into the League?”

Kurogiri inclines his head.

Hitoshi licks his lips, tastes the sweat of fear and adrenaline. “As—As a spy? At UA?”

“Not quite.”

Two simple words, and the crushing wash of terror swallows him whole again. “You—What?”

“We have no need of that,” he says. “Why keep you in an environment so detrimental to your development? With the proper education—Shinsou, with *our* education—you could become something incredible.”

Shit. *Shit*. Once more, Hitoshi’s frozen. The fuck is he supposed to say now? His eyes tear through the shadows again. He’s got no way to get word out, no way to get backup, no idea where he even is. Say *yes* and he might be whisked away for good, never to be heard from again. But say *no* and he might never get another chance.

He’s saved from tipping the scale of his own fate when Kurogiri continues, “We don’t expect you to make your decision immediately.”

“Wh—You—You don’t?”

“Certainly not. The error of delivering such a rash ultimatum was made clear after the last UA student to whom this position was extended.”

Bakugou Katsuki, of course. Hitoshi could hardly forget—the gossip rags still haven’t dropped the story of how All Might lost his powers. It was an equal loss for heroes and villains that day, and even if most of the details have been sensationalized, the shame of Bakugou’s role in it won’t soon be forgotten.

“You will have some time to consider our offer,” Kurogiri says magnanimously. “Society may have deemed us as villains, but we are not barbarians. This is your choice, Shinsou.”

He opens his mouth. Closes it. Choice. They’re giving him *a choice*? It’s too risky. What’s to stop him from running to the police? Or maybe this is just some kind of test, to see how deep his delinquency really runs. He eyes Kurogiri hard, weighing the risk. “How long do I have to decide?”

“We’ll be in contact when we’ve deemed it prudent,” Kurogiri simply says, which, okay, that’s not even close to an answer. “Consider this

an interview, of sorts. My associates and I have some decisions of our own to make, based on your performance today.”

This time, Hitoshi lets his gaze cast about at the reminder. Show them your fear, Nedzu had said. Let them feel powerful.

But Kurogiri watches with a wry crease of his eyes. He straightens his tie, clears his throat to center Hitoshi’s attention. “We’ll be keeping close watch until then. It should go without saying, but I’ll remind you anyway—keep this business between us. We’d rather not take any drastic measures, Shinsou, but we will if we must.”

The words hang in the air, the barely-insinuated warning invisible but no less present, like the winter chill that wraps around his throat. Politely worded or not, Hitoshi knows a death threat when he hears one.

“Of—Of course,” he says, and this time, the unease isn’t exaggerated. “Yeah, I mean, I’ll. Uh. Think about it.”

“Until then.” Kurogiri inclines his head and the fog moves over Hitoshi like a wave. He holds his breath, then releases it as his feet land on hard ice. The wind whips through the fog at full force, and he lurches once more as it disperses into the morning air, until there’s once more nothing but a dead-end street stretched before him.

He doesn’t finish the run. Schedule be damned. He stumbles home, feet numb in a way that has nothing to do with the cold. His thoughts feel staticky and far away—simmering somewhere like a kettle set to the boil, the promise of the whistle’s scream setting him on edge until his jaw aches with how hard it’s clenched.

The keys stick in the lock. It takes him nearly three tries to get it open. His hands are shaking too, which might have something to do with it, but he pretends not to notice. “Mom?”

The apartment is dark, muted—the hum of the fridge impossibly loud. “Mom? Mom?” His voice grows in pitch, and *god*, he can still feel the way the fog lingered like smoke in his lungs. He breathes hard, trying to expel the weight, and catches sight of the digital clock above the stove—little numbers glowing like a beacon. It’s already 7. She’ll have

left for work by now. She's fine. Everything's fine.

Except—

Except, *is it?*

He just got contacted by the League of Villains. Okay. Wow. Fuck. The *actual* League of Villains. Not some outposted double agent, not even some lackey from the lower rungs. They sent the *second-in-command* to kidnap, threaten, and then *offer* him a *job*.

He needs—He needs—god, he needs to *tell someone*. He's got his phone out before the thought is even fully formed, but as he stares down at mom's contact picture, another thought strikes. Kurogiri said they would be watching him. What if they've tapped his phone too? Shit. Is that even something they can *do*? Like—Like in movies? He's got fuck-all idea what kind of resources the League has at their disposal, but it's not a risk he can take. With effort, he puts the phone away.

Without it, he's faced once more with the dark. He makes rounds of the floor, flipping every light switch on. Doesn't open the windows, but can't help peeking through the blinds, as though he might spot Tomura Shigaraki himself waving one of his many hands from across the street.

He considers his next move. Should he skip school? Are they expecting him to? Would it look suspicious, to meet with the League of Villains and then stroll about like its business as usual?

It doesn't matter, he decides. He needs to go, needs to find Aizawa. But *shit*, he can't do *that* either, can he? The traitor will definitely be watching him today, closer than ever.

He decides to go anyway, if only to try to spot who gives him any more lingering glances than usual. That's the mission, after all. Even if things are all fucked up now—that's still the mission

He isn't sure he makes the right choice, in the end. School turns out to be—a lot. Too bright and too loud and too crowded. All eyes turn on him when he enters a room, and the skin on the back of his neck prickles like he's being followed everywhere he goes. Every giggle and whisper echoes in his mind, every draft from the ceiling vents like the cold shiver of a black fog crawling up his spine. Everyone seems to be looking him. Everyone except for Aizawa, who he hardly spots at all.

That's fine though, he tells himself. It's not like he can be seen with Aizawa anyway. He's alone. That's the mission. Always alone.

It's not until the bell rings out last period that he finally sees him—like all those weeks ago, herding his class onto the USJ shuttle at the edge of the parking lot. Aizawa's gaze skips him over like a stone across water. He gets on the shuttle. The doors close behind him.

It's fine, Hitoshi tells himself. It's fine. He's alone, but he's *fine*.

He walks home, doubles back the long way to give his 5K route a wide berth. He wonders how long he's got before Kurogiri's *deemed it prudent*. He wonders what it'll look like, when he does. If Kurogiri will burst through the front door or snatch him quietly from his bed while he sleeps. And then what's he supposed to do? Stand there in his pyjamas and kindly ask that they return him home safe and sound? He wonders if Kurogiri will really make good on that death threat, and then he tries very, very hard to stop wondering after that.

The lock still sticks, but mom swings the door open from the inside on the second try. Home early tonight, then.

"Hey, kiddo."

She doesn't hold it, doesn't even stick around long enough to see it almost close and smack him in the face before he can convince his body to move the meager few steps over the doormat. There's something cooking in the kitchen, the air warm with spices and music from the tinny speaker of her phone on counter set to full volume.

"How was school?" she calls over the clatter of dishes, and it's—normal, it's all so *normal*, this new habit they've fallen into where mom's finally here sometimes, mom's actually finally *here* and—

And he can't fucking move.

The clatter stills. The music pauses. She peers back around the corner. "Hitoshi?"

A beat. She lowers a spoon and moves closer, brows low. "You okay?"

He nods, but the damage is already done. Mom smooths a hand over his forehead and he all but flinches to avoid it. "I'm fine, I'm fine."

"Hitoshi."

“I’m *fine*.” And he is, he *is*. He can do this, he’s been training for this, *he can do this*, he just needs to—needs—he just—

He stops just short of slapping her hand away, grasps her wrist instead and holds it, just holds it and looks at her. Really looks at her.

He can do this. He *can* do this. But.

“I need your help.”

Chapter End Notes

Betcha didn't see THIS coming! (Unless you did, in which case, please tell me all your thoughts. Actually, tell me all your thoughts regardless. I'm literally begging!)

I love this chapter so much I'm literally vibrating with excitement and terror as I post it. This chapter was THE reason I wrote this fic!

Dead Set

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Saturday morning, the windows of Shouta's apartment are frosted shut. He hoists the flashlight off his tool belt like a hammer and picks away at the ice before he can crack it open. Patrol was quiet enough for a Friday night – if there's one thing an early winter's good for, it's keeping the usual pickpockets and creeps inside.

On the other hand, he's more exhausted than normal, having spent most of the night on the move instead of finding his usual perches. Dangling off the edges of skyscrapers makes for great sightlines, sure, but it's far from worth it with winds this deadly.

All told, Shouta manages to crawl home a little past 5AM, and he's up again by 10. Pro shifts might work on rotation, but the ever-growing pile of 1-A grading waits for no one.

He's barefoot in the kitchen, sleeping bag slung like a cape around his shoulders while he waits for his second cup of coffee to brew, when his phone buzzes on the counter. He spares it a glance but it's just an email—from his work account, no less—which he *definitely* isn't getting paid enough to keep up with over weekends. He's about to toss it aside when he notes the sender.

Saitama General Hospital.

"Heh?" Shouta says to the empty room. He opens the email.

Mr. Aizawa Shouta,

We've rescheduled your appointment, as per your request. Please arrive no later than 1PM.

Signed at the bottom, by Doctor Shinsou Haru.

An old familiar tension crawls its way across his shoulders and settles like a cold hand at the base of his neck, but it's outweighed by the years of Pro work that have long since taught him the dangers of losing his composure. He swallows down his *worst possible conclusion* thoughts in the same gulp as he chugs his coffee, taps out a text to Nedzu that he'll *Be at your place in 10*, then dials a taxi.

Nezdu, damn him, doesn't even ask what's happened. On the one hand, Shouta's grateful, as it saves him from having to face what his answer of *I don't know* might mean. On the other, he looks for all world as unbothered as if Shouta'd asked him out for tea, but the ever-there gleam in his eye tells a different story – like he already knows exactly where they're going, and, in fact, somehow planned this all along. It sets Shouta on edge. Well, more on edge.

In the end, they're over half an hour early for their "appointment," Nedzu tucked deep in his jacket pocket and Shouta's face obscured behind a baseball cap and medical mask.

The hospital grounds are sprawling, modern and sleek and glowing under a dusting of snow. Shouta notes the cameras and moves instinctively between them, but there's no sneaking around inside. It's straight to the front desk, where a young woman's eyes narrow over his request to meet with Doctor Shinsou.

"Doctor Shinsou's our Pediatric General?"

"Mmhm."

She plainly eyes the mouse-sized lump in his pocket. "Do you... have a child with you?"

Shouta's debating the merits of flashing his Pro badge when a familiar figure sweeps around the corner. The first time he'd seen Shinsou Haru, she'd been a miserable sight, hunched with shame in the empty halls of UA. Now, she marches forward like the world tilts on her axis, white coat billowing out behind her like some kind of medical halo. "That's okay, Karen. He's got an appointment."

The woman frowns over the records on her desk. "He does?"

"He does now," she says briskly. "Right this way, sir."

Shouta doesn't have to be told twice. They're step-in-step in an instant, though Mrs. Shinsou looks like she'd be dragging him along by the arm if she could. Shouta's seen plenty enough worried mothers in his line of work to recognize the sight, however well-concealed.

They keep walking, until the halls thin out into an area that no longer looks fit for patients—glass walls to wood, linoleum to carpet. She eventually stops outside a door, a plaque in the center painted with the characters of her name.

Inside his mother's office, Shinsou's curled into an armchair, hunched small enough he looks fit to be swallowed whole, hands wrung together. He springs to his feet at the sight of them, and Shouta breathes a little lighter to see it.

Years on the field may have mostly taught him to tamper the *worst case scenario* spiral in moments of uncertainty, but it still never hurts to see them concretely dispelled.

Mrs. Shinsou closes the door. At the click of the lock, there's a ruffle in Shouta's pocket before a pair of beady eyes poke out to meet Shinsou's nervous gaze. Shouta extracts Nedzu and deposits him on the arm of the chair Shinsou just vacated. He smiles in thanks, as unruffled as ever by the methods of his transportation, and Shouta can't help but feel a pang of envy at his own near loss of composure.

"Good afternoon," Nedzu says serenely, evidently much too intellectually advanced to ever have been hamstrung by his own case of illogically leapt-to conclusions. "I trust you have some exciting news for us, then."

Shinsou nods, but it's another moment before he can work up the breath to speak, and whatever ease Shouta had been lulled into evaporates. If something's got the kid *this* shaken up—

"It was the League of Villains," Mrs. Shinsou blurts.

Shinsou looks up sharply. "I—Mom!"

Nedzu makes a small sound—a breath of laughter, the quickly schools himself. "I empathize with your concern, Mrs. Shinsou, but that *was* what we had planned—"

"No," she snaps. "Actually, it wasn't. He wasn't contacted by your little traitor. He was contacted by *the* League of Villains."

This gives Nedzu pause. He tilts his head. Asks, "Shinsou?"

Shinsou wavers another second, then, "It was Kurogiri."

And it's like all the heat goes out of the room. "What?" Shouta hears himself ask.

"Yesterday morning, during my run. He contacted me. Uh, teleported me—somewhere. A barn, I think? I don't know. It was dark. I didn't get a chance to look around. He, uh, said he wanted to offer me the

chance to join the League, then...”

“Then?” Nedzu prompts.

“Then he let me go. Brought me back.” Shinsou lets out a long breath. “They didn’t hurt me. They didn’t just try to take me, like they did with Bakugou. He said they were giving me time to consider. He said—He said it was my *choice*.”

When he finishes, the silence is heavy, thick with dread and the thunderous beat of Shouta’s heart. Shinsou’s gaze sinks under the weight, and though Shouta knows he should say something to lift it, he can’t, for the life of him, find the words.

“Ah,” Nedzu finally breaks, oddly calm. “I was afraid it might come to this.”

Mrs. Shinsou’s gaze snaps over. “You *knew* this would happen?”

“I... considered the possibility.”

“Sir,” Shinsou says. “I—I tried to ask if they wanted to me to be a spy for them at UA. I figured, at least that way, I might still have a chance to get close enough to find the real traitor. But—he said no. He said UA was detrimental to my development, and—and that with *their* training, I could—” He stops, closes his eyes and shakes his head. “He doesn’t just want me to join them. He wants me to *join* them.”

“Which is exactly why we need to put a stop to this. Right now,” Mrs. Shinsou says, eyes never leaving Nedzu. “He’s not doing this.”

Nedzu’s silent.

“Mom,” Shinsou snaps, the pallor of fear starting to give way to the blotchy red of embarrassment. “You’re supposed to be helping.”

“I’m *helping* you not get *killed*.”

“I’m not gonna—ugh.” He breathes hard, and Shouta gets the impression this is a conversation they’ve had more than once while waiting for their arrival. “I know this wasn’t the plan, okay? But we can—we can come up with a new plan, right? We can still work with this. I can still do this.” He turns to Nedzu, eyes imploring.

“No.”

Shinsou’s gaze snaps to Shouta, as if just remembering he’s still there.

“Sensei?”

“No,” he repeats, unmoved. He holds the kid’s eye—that dark stare, sallow and deep-set with exhaustion, but bright. Always so bright. Something behind them goes hard now, cold with hurt.

“Your mother’s right. Winning the traitor’s trust was one thing, but actually making the League think you’ve joined them?” Just the thought sends him cold with dread—let alone the impossibility of the logistics. “Shinsou, think about it. We’d have no way to stay in contact, no way to keep watch over you.” And that’s barely scratching the surface. It would take months to develop a deep enough cover to fool the entire League of Villains, and that’s assuming Shinsou even had the training and clearance. “It’s—It’s too much to ask, Shinsou. It’s too dangerous.”

“It isn’t,” Shinsou insists. “It isn’t too much. Principal Nedzu’s a genius—he can think of a plan, so that I can keep in contact. I’ll—I’ll be careful, I’ll do anything I have to. I’m—I’m not scared.”

“Then you’re an idiot,” Shouta says plainly. “Because you should be.”

“Well I’m not!” he snaps. His timid posture unravels, teeth bared and shoulders set. A petulant child—no longer asking, but demanding.

Shouta sets his stance, a perfect mirror. *Go on*, he dares. Whine about it, throw a fit. Show me how immature you are, how absolutely out of your depth you are.

“You *know* I can do it,” Shinsou says, dead set and unwavering. “I’ve made it this far. I can make it there too.”

The thing is. The thing is, he probably *can*, the little shit. But that’s the scariest part. Training and clearance aside—Shinsou’s got the raw talent. Maybe he doesn’t have a natural liar’s affinity, but anything can be learned with enough dedication, and Shinsou’s more than made himself known in that department. Shouta can see it in his eyes, always so eager, so trusting—in Shouta, in himself. Despite everything, the kid never once stopped believing he could—*would*—do it. But there’s a danger in that, a recklessness in bravery—and a long way to fall from that kind of height.

Shouta can only hope to soften the landing. “Look, kid. I know you think you’ve got something to prove. And you *deserve* to, alright? But this? This isn’t how you have to do it.”

He sees the instant it starts to sink in. Shinsou's lips go tight, eyes suspiciously wet. He looks at his mother, at Nedzu. No one speaks.

Just take it, Shouta wills. Take the out, the graceful leave. It's the very least he deserves.

It's Nedzu who seals the deal, after a long—*too* long—moment of debate. He *actually* considered it, the little fucker. Probably measured up the risk-to-benefit ratio like physical scales before him. Shouta half expects him to say something idiotic and get the poor kid's hopes up again, but for once in his intellectually superior life, Nedzu manages the feat of shuffling off his *ends-over-means* mindset.

"They're right," he relents at last, sighing like it's some major inconvenience. "*Of course* they're right. I'm afraid I've allowed myself to forget, in my hurry to catch the traitor, that your safety is as much my responsibility as the rest of my students. I'm... sorry, Shinsou. It's too great a risk. I can't allow it."

"But... I can do it," Hitoshi says, voice tight. In that moment, he's never looked younger. "I *can* do it."

"Nobody's questioning that," Shouta says, soft as he can.

Wrong move. Violet eyes snap up, alight with a renewed fury—bitter and bright with tears. "You said we were partners. You said we were *partners*. You said you trusted me. But all you've ever done is treat me like a fucking child."

"Hitoshi," Mrs. Shinsou gasps.

Shouta holds up a hand. This is his blow to take—god knows Shinsou deserves someone to let loose on. He'd rather the kid let it out than bottle it up with only himself to blame. "Because you *are* a child. You're *sixteen*, Shinsou. And if you can't look out for yourself, then it's my responsibility to."

"I haven't been *able* to look out for myself—I've been too busy following the schedule and playing my *fucking* part," he seethes. "I've been working on this mission for *months*. I built up this whole persona, just like you wanted, and now *everyone* at school hates me for it. No one will even *talk* to me. And now what? I'm just supposed to—to stop? Just like that? You think I can just go back to normal? Make friends again like nothing happened? Everybody *already* thought I was an evil freak before—it's all but been confirmed at this point."

“Give them time,” Nedzu steps in. “I know it looks bad now, but things will get better. I’ll take every measure to guarantee it.”

Mrs. Shinsou expression twists like she can feel Shinsou’s pain as keenly as her own. “You did your best,” she says softly. “No one can fault you for that.”

Meaningless platitudes, and they all know it. Shinsou came for a fight, but no one else is swinging. As fast as it came, the tirade ices over. His gaze finds Shouta again, no longer pleading but cold, a frozen lake.

He clears his throat. “You did good, kid. I’m sorry. It’s over.”

But Shinsou's not hearing it—won't even look at him now. He turns, drops away beneath himself, and Shouta feels the moment it clicks into the place—the wall between them once again, that strange place between familiarity and anonymity, like it used to be, when Shinsou was nothing to him but another splash of UA's uniform colours on the backdrop of his life, unseen and unheard. And maybe it was better that way, before all the false promises, the lies. But it doesn't sting any less.

Shinsou leaves, and Shouta doesn't stop him.

Chapter End Notes

:~)

Realistic

Chapter Notes

Folks, I just about lost my mind reading the comments last chapter. You guys leave some of the funniest, sweetest, and most thoughtful comments. Oof. It makes my heart sing.

I seem to have picked up a number of new readers as well, so welcome welcome! Also, someone put me on the TV Tropes page, for which--if you're out there--I thank you!

Time passes in a daze.

It doesn't feel real. It feels—messy, like a broken bone. Painful, wrong, something unseen still bleeding beneath the skin.

He stops running. Stops going to cram school. Nearly stops going to *school* school— oversleeps on Monday and doesn't so much as get a finger wag from mom. She's all soft words and kind nudges, home from work early every night for home-cooked meals and longwinded offers that she's always there *if he wants to talk about it*. Shinsou gets it—hates it, but gets it. She wants to encourage him forward and still give him time to process.

Oh, he fucking processes alright.

He skips Tuesday too, just to see what she'll let him get away with, but being cramped up in the apartment all day is hardly better than school. Sitting alone with his thoughts is an exercise in self-loathing—one he bets he'd be getting his first A's of the semester on, if anyone fucking cared to grade it. It all spins around him in torturous circles—what he could have done better, how he should have been smarter, how he should have just done it, just taken the risk, just trusted himself like he knew—he *knew*—no one else would. Despite all the pledges to the contrary, Aizawa wasn't his *partner*, he was a UA teacher. UA's never done Hitoshi a favour in his life. He was an idiot to hope that had changed.

On Wednesday, he's finally had enough of the stink of his own misery, and drags himself to school. It's—not great. Just uneventful enough for the reality of the whole thing to really settle—nice and heavy and suffocating. Everything's changed and nothing has. The hours pass in silence, in solitude. In Phys Ed, he stumbles to a stop in the middle of

the gym, looks around at a room full of friends-turned-strangers, all performing flawless impressions of pretending he doesn't exist.

He's paired with Nishihara for a stretching exercise, and she doesn't so much as say a word the entire time. When the whistle blows to rotate stations, she races off without a second glance, like she'd rather be anywhere else.

Give it time, Nedzu had said. Yeah. Right.

The whistle blows again. "Shinsou, let's go! Stop wasting time."

He doesn't know how. To stop. To stop playing the part he's spent so many months carving out pieces of himself to fit in to. He doesn't know what to do.

Between periods, he spots Midoriya in the halls. There's a split second when they both pause, a beat of hopeful hesitation, before Midoriya drops his gaze, lets it cut through him like a cold breeze. *Because you're my friend*, he'd said once.

Is he?

Is anyone?

Hitoshi's dug himself into a corner. Worse, he's *buried* himself there. Picked the casket out himself, laid down like a good little *hero-in-training* and let Aizawa and Nedzu shovel on the dirt, bound by loyalty and blinded by the stars in his eyes.

Midoriya passes with his herd of friends, all excited chatter over the upcoming Provisional License Exam, and Hitoshi does nothing. It's just one more tick on the long list of ways they're better than him—more capable, more heroic. One more tick on the long list of opportunities he'll never have. Hitoshi watches them go, and it's like nothing's changed. Again and again, they get to prove themselves. Not once is he even allowed to try.

The slam of the UA dorms doors reverberates across campus, shaking cries from the birds in the nearby trees. Bulletproof, re-enforced steel, and somehow still not half of what it takes to keep those kids in place.

Shouta stands on the front steps, lets the winter breeze whip past him, and relishes the way it brings only silence. His ears still ring with the voices he cut out with his abrupt exit. *Sensei, when will have our grades back? Sensei, can I get an extension of this assignment? Sensei, wanna see this sick kickflip?*

There's certainly no lack of dedication in 1-A—an honourable trait in heroes-in-training, and one he's usually happy to nurture—but there's only so much a person can listen to Bakugou cuss or Kirishima wax poetic about manliness before their mind starts to fray. The kids are more excitable than usual—a mix of pent-up energy and nerves. There's no training tonight as the Provisional License Exams are first thing tomorrow. He's given them to night off to rest and prepare. He doesn't want any last-minute injuries—*Midoriya*—slowing them down, not when they've all come so far just to get here.

Shouta's no stranger to tough love, but even he'll admit, he's been in a stricter mood than usual. It's not just the students who have worked for this.

“Your parents sacrifice just as much as you do, every day, when they entrust you to our care,” he'd said, repeating the words he'd drilled into every year of students before them. “Your teachers, your fellow students—we all want to see you succeed tomorrow.” *I nearly died for you brats*, he'd almost added. And, *Not everyone's lucky enough to get this chance. Do me a favour and don't waste it.*

It's out of his control now, one way or the other. They'll either fail or succeed on their own merit.

He halts the thoughts before they trail any further, but the tracks are already all laid out, cruelly inviting. The Exams aren't the only reason for his bad mood this week. He closes his eyes with a breath of frustration, and—as though orchestrated by some malevolent higher power—opens them just in time to see the main building's doors open. Students pool out across the lawn, braving the winter chill, and there, among the crowd—

Fuck.

His chest goes tight with a guilt that's hounded him all week, every time the thoughts slip past his guard—how badly Shinsou had wanted this, how badly Shouta let him down.

But it wasn't right to ask him. It never was. From day one, the whole thing had screamed immoral—not to mention blatantly illegal—and if

he's honest with himself, Shouta'd only been willing to look past it because he hadn't thought it would last.

He thinks of his picture in Shinsou's sketchbook, thinks of the blatant hero worship in his eyes, his overflow of gratitude at any scrap of advice or praise or attention. Shouta watches him now, how he falls behind his classmates, eyes downcast and face drawn tight as though pained. Shouta's been trying to catch his glance all week—like the kid had always been trying throughout the months of the mission—but it's like their roles are reversed. Shinsou avoids him with an effortless ease, feet dragging with the weight of his misery.

Fucking *fuck*.

He's got a dorm full of students behind him, about to be put to the test, and there's not a thing he can do for them.

But there's still one student he can do something for.

"Shinsou!" And again, when he kid doesn't stop. "Shinsou!"

He blinks, the fog clearing from eyes as he straightens and spins to follow the sound. Violet eyes go round when they find the source, as startled as the few nearby students who catch the exchange as well. Secrecy be damned. The mission might be over, but Shouta's still got a job to do.

"I'll see you at training tonight."

If he were still being timed, Hitoshi's sprint from UA to Jōshubi would easily be his fastest yet. His heart beats harder than it did on his first session, his hands tremble with excitement.

The mission's still on. It has to be. There's no way Aizawa'd want to keep training with him unless it was for a reason. Maybe it's reckless to jump to conclusion, but hell, Hitoshi thinks after everything, he's earned a little recklessness.

He'll have to keep it a better secret from mom this time around, given how adamant she'd been that they put a stop to things. He might even have to keep it a secret from Nedzu—for all Hitoshi knows, he's

already got a backup plan to find the traitor in the works. But Aizawa trusts him. Aizawa thinks he can do it, is still willing to help him try. If he has Aizawa on his side, then he's still got a chance.

He slides to a breathless stop and all but kicks the doors open. The lights are still dim, but they come on a second later. Aizawa stands across the room, look like he's just arrived himself. His eyes warm with the hint of a smile. "Glad you could make it."

Thank you, Hitoshi wants to say. *Thank you thank you thank you*. "It's still on?"

The smile falters. "What?"

"The mission?" Hitoshi presses. "The mission's still on?"

Silence looms, heavier with every second that passes. And passes. Aizawa says nothing. Hitoshi's thunderous heartbeat sinks colder with every second. "Sensei?"

"Shinsou," he starts. "We talked about this."

Disappointment hits with a staggering weight. Hitoshi sways back, feels his back hit the door. No. No no no. He still had a chance. He thought—

He thought he still had a chance.

"Come on, kid," Aizawa says softly. "Don't look at me like that."

"I can do it," he says, numb. "I don't care if it's dangerous. Heroes put themselves in danger all the time."

Aizawa sighs. "You're not a hero, Shinsou. That's the thing."

His fists clench. His eyes feel hot. "I could be. If you'd just—If you'd just give me a—"

"I said *no*." The soothing voice evaporates, and there it is, just like he knew it would be, that contempt, that disgust. Aizawa pinches his bridge of his nose, closes his eyes and breathes hard. Like it's all just such a hassle, such a big fucking inconvenience. Like it was no big deal to put Hitoshi through *months* and *months* of bullshit, but the second he actually wants something in return for all his work, it's too much, it's time to slam the breaks, time to give up. "We shouldn't even be having this discussion. You're just a kid."

“*Fuck you,*” Hitoshi spits, and it’s like all the venom and rage of the past three months have come spewing out behind the words. Aizawa doesn’t even look surprised. If anything, it makes him angrier. “I’m just a *kid*? That never stopped you from offering me the job in the first place.”

“The job didn’t involve you getting abducted by the League of Villains. The job kept you close. The job kept you *safe*.”

“Why don’t I get a say in this?” Hitoshi demands. “Why aren’t you even giving me a chance? Why aren’t you even letting me *try*?” His voice shakes, vision skewed with tears, and if Aizawa’s repulsed by his weakness, he can’t see it, he doesn’t fucking care, he’s *earned this*.

“Why does everyone else get to try to be a hero except me? Because of my quirk? Because of my shitty fucking villain’s quirk, you don’t think I can do it, you don’t trust me?” Fucking *fuck*. And he knew better too—it *always* ends up like this. They lie and say it won’t change how they see him, they lie and say it doesn’t bother them, but it always does, it *always fucking does*.

“You don’t get a say because you’re a student,” Aizawa counters. “And like it or not, my students’ safety is always my first priority.”

“You said I wasn’t your student, you said we were *partners*. You said we were equals.”

“I don’t want you getting hurt, no matter *what* our relationship is, because I care about you.” His voice starts to strain now too, louder, angrier. Good. He’s not half as angry as Hitoshi.

“That’s a real nice way of showing it,” he cuts like a knife, aiming to hurt. “By finally giving me hope, just to crush it the second it stopped being convenient for you.”

“Shinsou,” he says. “You need to be realistic here.”

“I have been,” he roars. “I have been realistic my whole fucking life. I resigned myself to being treated differently the day my quirk developed. I *knew* I wasn’t going to pass the entrance exam, I *knew* I wasn’t going to win at the Sports Festival, I *knew* I was never going to be a Pro. I was *always* realistic. Until *you* gave me hope, until you promised to train me, and believed in me, and finally gave me a shot to be something better.” The words pour out, all the frustration and anger and resentment of years of missed moments and distrusting gazes and last-picked-off-the-bench resignations coalesced behind them, with Aizawa as their single target, like a pot set to boil nine

years ago and only now piercing the air with its scream, scalding hot and overflowing. “*That’s* when I stopped being realistic. That’s when I let myself finally hope for the impossible. And *you* took that away from me.”

The mask comes down hard over Aizawa’s face, impassive, like it was all those weeks ago during their first session. “If you can’t take your losses like an adult, that’s all the more reason we never should have treated you like one in first place.” He’s cold with the hard edge of fury, quiet where Hitoshi was a storm. “Go ahead and throw a fit, it won’t change my mind. You’re not a Pro, and you’re not a hero. You *can’t* be. End of story. The mission,” he bites, “*is over.*”

Aizawa doesn’t even have to re-collect himself after the outburst – the whole thing delivered with the calm indifference of a teacher handing out a failing grade to a student they know deserves it. It’s not a dare to be challenged, it’s a promise, and Hitoshi is frozen cold in its wake. *You’re not a hero. You can’t be.*

End of story.

He goes home.

The apartment is dark, quiet in its emptiness. He’s crying now, loud and ugly, the way he couldn’t on the walk home. There’s no one to see now, no one to tell him to *go ahead and throw a fit*, no one to pour their disappointment over him until he drowns. Mom’s not here, dad’s not here, fucking no one’s ever here. Hitoshi sits alone in the dark, and cries until the pounding in his head is worse than the ache in his chest.

He wakes to clear skies. A warm breeze brushes though the clouds to reveal brilliant, dazzling blue. Even the ice on the windowsill glitters in the sunlight, picturesque. Hitoshi curls beneath the covers and pretends the whole world isn’t somehow mocking him.

Mom left at the usual time. Hitoshi didn't tell her about last night—sure as hell doesn't need her knowing how much of an idiot he was for being naïve enough to think Aizawa had changed his mind. She'd tried to shake him awake this morning, to no avail.

"Not up to school today?" she'd asked.

Hitoshi hadn't answered, and a few minutes later, heard the front door close.

He's not going anywhere. What's the fucking *point*? Maijima will probably be relieved to see his desk empty anyway, and it's not like he'll be missing any important *hero* lessons. People like him aren't heroes. People like him *can't* be.

He sleeps like shit, restless, in and out of hazy dreams that drag him through the morning and into the afternoon. His eyes are still swollen from their tears last night, his mouth dry. He fucking *stinks* too. He's finally settled on relocating the pity party to the shower, but hasn't actually managed the feat yet, when the buzz of his phone gives the extra incentive. He wriggles around, feeling for it beneath the tangle of the sheets, rolls over to check it with his face squished against the pillow. The glare of the screen makes him squint, then again still when he sees it's a text from an unknown number.

There's been an opening, it reads, and Hitoshi's heart stops. *It's time to make your choice.*

The New Recruit

Chapter Notes

Friends! I come bearing both good news and not-so-good news.

Good news first! The incredibly talented and inspiring Keiid over on Twitter blessed my entire life and soul with a beautiful comic based on a scene in the last chapter ([here!](#)) It is absolutely gorgeous and if you haven't already seen it, please go leave them some love.

Second piece of news. This fic is going on a *brief* and *temporary* hiatus. This is because this is the final chapter of Part 1 (surprise!). Most of Part 2 is written but I want to at least have the first draft completed before I begin posting. It will make up the bulk of this fic, and honestly, guys, in terms of how many moving pieces I'm about to throw on the board, it's easily the most ambitious thing I've ever written. So, yeah. I really wanna get it nailed down before I start putting it out there.

In the meantime, I will be using all your lovely kudos and comments as support to fuel me to get it done as fast as possible. I'm also on tumblr ([here!](#)) if you want to talk and/or look at my ungodly plethora of writing memes.

Thank you!

He stares at the phone long after the screen falls dark.

The room is still, shuttered and dim, the distant thrum of the building's generator ringing in the silence. Twisted in the smothering warmth of his bedcovers, Hitoshi stares. And stares. His breath sounds impossibly loud.

The screen brightens once more.

We'll be seeing you at UA.

It's an electric shock. He rockets upright and over the bed, scrambles out of the tangle of sheets and staggers to his feet, heart like thunder. It's the League of Villains, no doubt about it. But—*there's been an opening*. What does *that* mean? Are they planning an attack? At UA? And *why*? Surely not just to get to him—Kurogiri made it clear he had

plenty of easier ways to get a hold of him. So they're after something else.

The thought's not halfway formed before he's out of the room and down the hall, shoving bare feet into shoes. He freezes with a hand on the door.

What is he *doing*?

If the League of Villains is planning an attack, what's *he* going to do about it? Run to UA and—and *what*? Warn them? Set up defenses? Who would believe him? Nedzu and Aizawa were the only ones who ever knew he was in contact with the League anyway, and they've made it *plenty* clear they don't want his help. But if not him, then who?

He has to do *something*. He's the only one who can.

Hitoshi grits his teeth, wraps a fist around the doorknob and wrenches it open.

And he runs.

The frozen air hits like a shock, and he's still wearing the clothes he fell asleep in last night, but he sprints through it, skidding ice on sharp corners and narrowly dodging traffic as he cuts through intersections. He keeps going, even as voices shout and horns blare. He keeps going, even as his lungs heave and legs burn. He keeps going, even as he races around the final corner, sweating dripping into his eyes, and sees—

Nothing.

Campus is quiet. Polished chrome, gleaming under a tranquil frost. Entirely normal.

Momentum carries him the first few yards through the gates, but he's slowed by the time he reaches the center block, gasping for breath. He spins, unwilling to believe it, but. *Nothing*. The fields undisturbed beneath a light dusting of snow. He starts inside the main building, takes the stairs two at a time, skids to a stop in front of 1-A and tears open the door.

It's fucking *empty*. Lights off, no schoolbags.

He stumbles back into the hall, cold with sweat and a growing,

gnawing desperation. Where is everyone? Where's Aizawa?

"Young Shinsou?"

All Might stands at the end of the hall, a mug in one hand and a stack of papers balanced awkwardly in the other. He frowns, gaunt features severe beneath a furrowed brow. "What you doing out of class, young man? And where's your uniform?"

His mouth starts open but there's no sound to follow, words strangled behind the weight of what the *fuck* he's supposed to say to explain *this*. Before he can even try, a deafening boom rocks the building. The ground shakes and windows tremble as a cloud of dust comes raining down from the ceiling.

The mug slips from All Might's hand and shatters as a blaring alarm pierces the air. "Get back! Get away from the windows!"

But Hitoshi's rooted, frozen, eyes wide on the source of the sound, the scene unfolding outside on the plaza. The main gates have been blown open in a cloud dust and snow, nearly eclipsing the rubble where the wall once stood. From beyond it, a swirling black cloud seeps into existence. A portal.

"Fucking shit." All Might lunges forward, grabs his arm and tears off down the hall. Hitoshi stumbles after him, numb, but not before he sees the fog spread out to suffocate the main entrance, blocking it off entirely as dozens of shadowy forms begin to wade through.

"Where are we going?" he manages.

All Might stifles a cough against his hand. When he pulls away, it's flecked with blood. "Back exit. They'll see us if we go out front." He moves with surprising speed, grip tight and controlled. Hitoshi focuses on it, on the pound of their feet against the linoleum, and slowly, the numbness of shock bleeds away. They've just reached the stairs when two figures emerge onto a landing below—one with scaly, lizard-like features, the other masked beneath a tall hat.

Hitoshi whirls around, catching All Might before he can reach the first step and shoving him back. He goes without protest, face hardened in silent understanding, and together, they flee back the way they came.

They reach the door to 1-A, realizing at the same time—they have to hide. All Might dashes into the room and for the nearest desk. He throws it up against the door, then motions for Hitoshi to pass him

another.

They barricade themselves hastily, sloppily, a row of desks and chairs piled high, but All Might soon succumbs to another coughing fit, hand pressed tight over his mouth to keep silent. He waves Hitoshi back when he tries to approach.

“I’m fine,” he manages, voice strained. “Are you alright?”

He nods, shakes his head. Hesitates. “All Might, I have to—I—”

“The Pros will be here any moment, son. Don’t worry.”

Hitoshi looks to their measly defenses. It’s hardly enough to keep a toddler out, let alone two well-equipped villains. They won’t last. But more importantly— “What about the other students?”

All Might’s eyes go soft. “They’re fine. 1-A and 1-B are away today, at the License Exam.”

A crash sounds from down the hall. A door slamming open, a furious growl.

“It’s alright.” All Might takes his shoulder and steers him away. Hitoshi’s back hits the wall, but his eyes don’t leave the door. It’s not enough. They’re going to find them. They’re going to get *in*. But All Might’s hand is warm on his shoulder, voice low in a steady repetition of, *It’s alright, you’re okay, you’re going to be okay*—and the strain in the words is somehow soothing, like it helps just to know Hitoshi’s not the only one lying to himself, not the only one scared. The sound cuts a thin, surgical line through him and the image he’d constructed in his head, the perfect hero, indomitable, unafraid. He tears his gaze from the door, looks at All Might, long and hard, and feels the line split open into a wound. The roar behind his eyes goes oddly quiet. He thinks.

There’s no way in hell the League of Villains orchestrated this attack just to get to him. There has to be some reason, something they *want*. The students are gone, it can’t be that. Aizawa’s not here either.

He looks at All Might, powerless and all-too-human, specks of blood on his chin.

Of course. What has the League of Villains always wanted?

Hitoshi’s across the room in a second. He grabs the first desk, tears it

back, and reaches for another.

“What—What are you *doing*?” All Might hisses.

“They’re after you,” he says breathlessly, and tears down a stack of chairs. “They’re after *you*. We can’t be here.”

Another crash from outside, closer now. He can almost make out their voices.

Fuck. Fuck fuck shit fuck shit. Okay. Okay. New plan. They need a new plan. They’re going to kill All Might. Fuck. They’re going to *kill* All Might, and then they’re going to kill him—

Except.

Except they’re not going to kill him, are they? Not if they can recruit him.

“All Might.” He turns, looks, lands on the broom closet at the back of the room. “All Might. You—You need to hide.”

“What?”

“You need to hide *now*,” he hisses, and jabs a finger to the closet. “I can—I can distract them. I can keep you safe.”

All Might looks like he’s been punched. “I’m not going to let you put yourself in danger for me, son.”

“No, you don’t—”

“It’s okay,” All Might says firmly. “You’re going to be okay.”

“You’re not *listening* to me,” he growls, and *fuck*, why won’t they ever just *fucking* listen to him? “You can’t fight them like this. They’ll kill you.”

Another sound—the slam of a door just across the hall. “Not here.”

“Idiot,” follows another voice. “There’s another room.”

“I won’t let them hurt you,” All Might whispers, the whites of his eyes stark with fear. He fumbles Hitoshi behind him, the frail width of his body hardly enough to cover him, let alone shield him from threat. “I’ll hold them back while you run.” He’s not listening, they’re going to be here any second and he’s still not listening—

“All Might.”

“Everything’s going to—”

He doesn’t finish the words. He can’t. He’s gone slack, a stalk of wheat swaying in the breeze, eyes void of the panic that filled them just seconds ago. Void of anything at all.

“Get in the closet,” Hitoshi commands, and the power drips like venom off his tongue, warping the air and the space between words. “No matter what happens to me, don’t move or make a sound.”

All Might lurches around without a second glance. Hitoshi watches, fists clenched and eyes hard on the back of his head as it vanishes from sight, like the weight of his gaze might help pin him in place. The doors close with a click, and the sound knocks the air out from his lungs.

He springs into motion like a shot gone wild, lunging forward to drag the last few desks back from their haphazard pile by the door. Their legs scrape the floor, loud, and the footsteps outside the door pause, then quicken. Hitoshi rushes to meet them, thoughtless, fearless, as the door flies open and the two figures from the stairwell sweep forward. The smaller figure—a man with pointed reptilian features—rushes in and arcs a sword in a warning swipe. “Hands up! Nobody move!”

Hitoshi complies, hands raised, eyes wary on the blade now resting at the base of his throat. The lizard-man’s eyes narrow with a vicious focus. “Anybody else in here?”

“No,” he says, and lets loose the tendrils of his quirk. Like a fisherman casting out over still, unsuspecting waters, he doesn’t tighten the net—he only has one, after all, and he’ll need to have them both before he risks reeling them in—but he lays it out around the lizard-man, unseen and unfelt. “I’m the only one here.”

Lizard-man doesn’t look to be buying it. “Compress?”

The second figure brushes past them—a tall man, masked and lavishly dressed. He makes a circle of the room, then turns back their way. “Doesn’t look—” There’s a long pause. Then, “Oh.”

Hitoshi flinches at the sound, mind already a firestorm of worst-case-scenarios, but Mr. Compress simply says, “Weapons down, Spinner. It seems we have a sympathizer in our midst.”

“The fuck?” The sword jabs closer. “Who? The kid?”

Hitoshi doesn’t waste a second. “So you do recognize me. I’m honoured.” He lowers his hands with a sly grin, and—when he isn’t immediately beheaded for his insolence—turns away entirely, facing Mr. Compress instead. He extends a hand. It doesn’t tremble.

“Shinsou Hitoshi,” he introduces, and tips his head in the facsimile of a bow. “Heard you guys were hiring.”

Behind the masked gaze, it’s hard to tell if the ruse is working, but he doesn’t need his full trust—just a word. The net’s extended, lure cast and teeming with power. Just a single word, and he’s got them—a single word, and it’s over, he’s safe, *All Might’s* safe.

“Spinner,” Mr. Compress says, right over Hitoshi’s head. “Be so kind as to ask our guest his reason for being here, would you?”

The reel snaps back empty. His only defense, evaded as simply as Mr. Compress steps around him, returning to Spinner’s side. Hitoshi’s heart hits the soles of his feet, ice-cold.

“Huh?” Spinner asks. “Why me?”

“I’m afraid you’re the only one who can, my friend,” Mr. Compress says, and taps a single finger against his temple. “Surely you remember the new recruit Kurogiri said might be joining us.”

Spinner’s eyes go wide, and the blade that had lowered in his distraction snaps to Hitoshi’s neck again. “You filthy fucking brainwasher,” he growls. “Try anything and I’ll fucking kill you!”

He wouldn’t. Hitoshi could stop him first. But it’s not Spinner he’s worried about. His eyes snap between the two villains—from the difference in height to the weapons they carry. Could he command Spinner to take down his partner in time? Not if his training with Aizawa is anything to go by—brainwashed people aren’t particularly dexterous, and a split second could make all the difference. Between how long it would take to him to actually get the words out and how long it would take Spinner to move, a veteran like Mr. Compress could do more than enough damage. To Spinner *and* to him.

It would be worth it, if it were just him. Worth it to try, at least. But not with All Might’s life on the line too.

The hesitation is all Mr. Compress needs. His eyes narrow behind the

mask, wandering the room a second time, paused over the misplaced desks and chairs.

Spinner jabs the sword again, impatient. “Get talking, kid. We know you’re no fucking hero course wannabe. What are you doing in here?”

Mouth dry and cold with sweat, Hitoshi scrambles. Mr. Compress isn’t going to talk—they know his classroom, they know his quirk—they know him too well to fall for his tricks. Reality crashes down, and he’s got *nothing*. There’s no talking his way out of this one, and certainly no punching. There’s no version of this fight where he wins.

But then, it doesn’t have to be a fight. Maybe they know not to fall for his first trick, but they know him just well enough to fall for his second.

“What am I doing?” he repeats, brazenly, *miraculously* calm. “The same thing as you, probably. Trying to prove myself to the boss.” He grins, vicious and disarming. “Trying to kill All Might.”

At last, Mr. Compress’s wandering gaze pauses. He still doesn’t speak, but Spinner covers him, practically a growl. “So? Where is he?”

Hitoshi shrugs, and jabs a thumb out the window. “Pretty sure I saw him outside just a second ago.”

The plexiglass windows of the viewing deck wobble with the tremors of one of Bakugou’s signature explosions. Shouta can’t see him from this angle, lost somewhere below in the smoked-out corral of the Provisional License Exam floor, but he can sure as hell hear him.

There’s movement from his right. An arm extends to block his view of the field, paper cup in hand, the smell of coffee warm and rich.

“Looked like you could use one,” Kan says.

He probably does, damnit. Shouta knows he looks a mess, but crippling guilt will do that to a man’s sleeping schedule. He takes the cup, offers a gruff but sincere, “Thanks.”

“How are they doing?” Kan asks.

Shouta takes a long, scalding sip, and sets the cup at his feet. “Not dead yet.” They passed the first phase easily enough—and with surprising cooperation. Shouta wasn’t sure at first if he’d done the right thing in keeping the hate-on the other schools had for 1-A a secret, but was glad to see it pay off in the end. Still, the trials aren’t over yet. Phase two is a search and rescue exercise—nothing they haven’t done a dozen times in class—but Shouta’s got eyes on Gang Orca prepping to storm the field from a hidden door, and knows the rescue’s really only half the battle.

Sero and Uraraka are probably 1-A’s best bets until then, though Ashido could rack up some points dissolving rubble so long as she manages to avoid dripping any acid on the “civilians” trapped beneath. It shouldn’t be too hard—they’re easy enough to spot in their safety vests and colour-coordinated costumes. She’ll manage, if she can keep focused. A quirk like his would be pretty useless in a test like this, but then, it always was, back in school. Reminds him of a certain brainwasher.

That’s the problem with tests built by and for people with rubble-dissolving quirks. Someone like Shinsou might not be of much use in a play setting, but in the real world, with *real* frantic civilians and panicking bystanders, a quirk like Shinsou’s could make all the difference between toppling the remnants of a collapsed building and staying still long enough to be dug out. Someone with the ability to de-escalate that kind of situation with a single word would be invaluable.

A buzz in his pocket cuts the thought short. Aizawa fumbles for his phone, still scanning the stadium below, and finally, does a double take at the words flashing on the screen.

UA Under Attack!

He’s on his feet before he knows it. There’s a flurry of movement from the other teachers in the viewing deck, phones gripped tight and faces pale. The lights over the stadium flare bright and an alarm sounds out, a sharp voice signalling a halt to the exam. Students freeze in place and glance around, equal parts confusion and suspicion. The hidden door slides open to Gang Orca’s commanding rumble, “Clear the field! All students to the front of the room!”

Aizawa casts his eyes in a frantic headcount. 1-A’s all there, filing towards the door, brows furrowed and arms crossed at the interruption. It’s fine, they’re *fine*. They can always re-take the exam—

as long as they're all here, as long as they're all safe.

A heavy hand claps his shoulder. Shouta locks gazes with Kan, tight-lipped and grim. "They're safest here," he says. "You go. I got this."

Shouta nods. He's right. 1-A's safe, but UA might not be.

Dust and debris litter the field as Hitoshi leads the way across the grass. His foot catches on a bit of industrial pipping—blown nearly halfway across campus by the explosion that decimated the front gates, and Spinner's claws dig into his shoulder at his stumble. The fabric tears, but doesn't dare look, gaze frozen ahead, toward the alleged *emergency bunker* he claimed All Might had taken shelter in.

A helicopter roars somewhere overhead, casting them into shadow. Spinner growls and shoves him forward—"Hurry the fuck up!"—and *shit*, he doesn't even know where they're *going*, but he can't backtrack now, he's got to keep their attention.

His vision goes dark again, but it's not a shadow. A cloud of black fog swirls up like dust from beneath their feet. "Spinner, Compress," says a cool, chillingly familiar voice. "Anything on your end?"

"Not yet," Mr. Compress says, "but we've something that might interest you anyway."

A pause. Kurogiri materializes fully from the air, eyes indecipherable as they lock onto Hitoshi. But before he can speak, they're thrown into the shadow again, the roar of the helicopter above as it circles back around.

Kurogiri sighs. "Nevermind, then. I'm afraid we've run out of time. I had to warp the rest of the Vanguard Squad out—Dabi was nearly caught and the Pros are moving in."

Spinner curses. "What, so we just give up?"

"Be sensible, Spinner. We can't afford to lose any more members," Mr. Compress says and tilts his head in Hitoshi's direction.

"Yeah, whatever."

“Better luck next time, my friends.” Kurogiri waves a hand, extending a blanket of fog. The claws release from Hitoshi’s shoulder as Spinner and Mr. Compress vanish into the cloud. A breath of relief punches from his chest, but catches in his throat before release. The portal looms over and around him, a yawning darkness, choking out the sun, and Kurogiri hovers, a calculative patience that sinks into Hitoshi’s skin like a hand around his throat. Kurogiri doesn’t take him. Not by force.

Instead, eyes twisted in a smile, he extends a hand.

Shouta flies through the city, weapon spun from the flick of his wrist, mindless with a focus that drives him on at inhuman speed. He’s breathless, face stinging and eyes streaming from the wind, when he spins over the heads of the crowds gathered and lands in a crouch at the decimated gates of UA. The wall has been blown wide open, dust swirling between the flashing lights of red and blue.

He flashes his Pro badge and jumps the tape, then rushes to where Kayama stands guard.

“Hold it,” she says. “We’ve got eyes on villains on the lawns. Don’t provoke them—we think they’re clearing out.”

“Where’s All Might?” Shouta demands.

“No reports,” Kayama shakes her head. “But all students are—” She freezes, eyes gone tight, and raises a hand to her earpiece. “Say that again.”

“What is it?”

She holds up a silencing finger, and whatever she’s hearing can’t be good. Her eyes fly wide. “They’ve got a student.”

The words are barely out of her mouth before they’re both off in a sprint, Shouta’s heart doing double time in his chest. “West fields,” Kayama reports. “Fucking *shit*—it’s Kurogiri.”

He sees for himself a moment later—though smoke and dust, a black cloud hovers over the field. It’s like some kind of sick dream, the

instant between sleep and waking, when time seems to bend and stretch over eternity, a bitter twist in the pit of his stomach—of failure, of knowing he's too late, of knowing there's nothing he can do but watch as—

As the smoke clears, and he sees Shinsou.

Helicopter blades pound above, the scream of sirens and clamour of voices somewhere far away. The sun pours over them, streaming through the smoke, violent and blinding, reflected like the glint of knives against the frost, and Kurogiri's hand hangs patient before him, a question, a haunting invitation.

And Hitoshi reaches back.

Part 1
End

Just a Child

Chapter Notes

Hello again!

Wow, so I'm back a lot sooner than I thought I would be. What can I say, inspiration is a hell of a drug. Thank you so much for all of your patience and continued support, for all of your beautiful comments and kudos, and to everyone who stopped by to say hi on tumblr!

Please mind the updated tags. I've gone ahead and tagged everything that isn't a major spoiler, but I'll be sure to let you guys know at the beginning of future chapters if something's been added or if a particular tag will be featured heavily.

Thank you again, and on with the show!

Part 2

Traitor

The dust settles. Sirens wail in the distance, the roar of helicopter like thunder overhead. The black smoke that choked his vision moments ago is gone—its last tendrils leached away into the cold sky. It left behind nothing. No one. An emptiness that echoes.

“Eraserhead.”

Shouta stares. Keeps staring, as though he could will that terrible dark cloud back to existence.

“Eraser.”

Like if he looks long enough, he’ll see something he missed, some crack in the illusion, some miracle by which Shinsou’s still there.

“Aizawa, for fuck’s sake.” A punch accompanies the words, and, “—to Kan. He’s bringing your classes around the back,” Kayama says. “Come on, Nedzu wants them all in the stadium.”

He nods, but doesn’t know if she waits around long enough to see it. Her voice grows distant, shouting into her earpiece. “Yamada, get those fucking reporters off the property. And who’s got eyes on Yagi?”

It fades behind the sirens, louder now. More lights accompany those of the first responders—firetrucks and police cars in violent neon, horns blaring to clear the swarms of reporters crowding the wreckage of the gate like ants around a collapsed colony. Something in Shouta clicks into place at the sight, a familiarity beyond himself. His body slides back under his control, the autopilot light flashing on in the back of

his head.

The students are the first priority.

He moves. Away from the clamour and the chaos of the front gates, a ghost slipping through the hellishly empty campus and to the parking garage beneath the stadium. He spots the 1-A shuttle right away—half the students with anxious faces pressed against the windows, the others with their feet already on the ground

“Sensei!” Midoriya starts over, dodging when Kan tries to heard him back. “Sensei, is everyone okay? Can we help?”

“There’s no helping anything,” he snaps, voice thick and several degrees rougher than he’d intended. “It’s over. Now, all of you, off. With me. Stay close.”

For once in their lives, they listen, fall into step without protest when he arranges them, trouble-makers at the front, Iida at the back to run rearguard. He runs a headcount, then a second and a third, just to be sure. They’re all here, and safe, and not with eyes blank in cold fury, not disappearing in a cloud of black smoke, not reaching out to shake the hand more poised to strangle them dead in the blink of an eye because Shouta was too fucking stupid to see it coming and too fucking slow to stop it and—

Yeah. Students first.

“Sensei,” Midoriya tries. “What happened? Is anybody hurt?”

What happened? Would, *I have no fucking idea*, assuage him? Or how about, *a student was just kidnapped by the League, and it’s my probably fault*. Except, that’s not really true, is it? It’s more, *a student just defected to the League, and it’s definitely my fault*.

Autopilot doesn’t seem to cover that, so Shouta settles for silence.

It’s chaos inside the stadium—the roar of hundreds of voices, students’ nervous chatter and teachers’ sharps commands. Shouta keeps his face neutral and his voice calm and carefully *carefully* keeps his thoughts quiet, doesn’t let them get swept up in the roar.

He counts the familiar faces—Yamada, Ishiyama, Maijima, a few officers and local Pros he recognizes from field work, helping watch the perimeter. Confined, word begins to circulate between the classes—witness accounts of the attack that rapidly devolve into rumour and

hearsay. Shouta manages to pick out the important bits. Class 1-A and 1-B are both all accounted for. 1-D and 2-D saw a few staff and student injuries, but nothing serious. No one's yet seen All Might.

Then, he hears whispers of something else.

A student's gone missing. A student's been taken by the League of Villains. A student joined them.

Someone got it on camera. Shouta catches it over the shoulders of the crowds huddled around their phones like flies to honey, heads pressed together as they replay it again and again. Shaky footage taken from a classroom window, three figures trekking across the field, swallowed by a fog, and disappearing from sight. Within minutes, the video's already circulating on the major networks—slow-motion recaps and professional analysts to break it down in real-time.

The hour passes. The nervous energy in the air shifts, doesn't quite dissipate, but settles into a hum, an itch. The police begin to clear out. The helicopter that's been circling campus grows distant, until it's barely an echo. Shouta takes cue, signals to Kan, and begins the long march of herding 1-A back to the dorms.

Midoriya's not asking questions anymore. He's seen the answers. They all have. The threat's gone—the League got what they wanted. Still, that doesn't stop Shouta from seeing them all the way in to the common room, looking them over long and hard, and *meaning* it when he says, "If any of you so much as *think* of stepping a foot outside this building, you're expelled, full stop."

The air hits colder alone. The front lawns are still in absolute ruin—reporters prowling like wolves behind the bright yellow police cordons that stand where the gate once did. Evidence markers dot the scene like tiny gravestones, forensics detectives and keen-eyed Pros combing their way between them.

Six missed calls and twenty-three texts summon him to the main pavilion. In the foyer, he spots Kayama, head bent low in conversation with a stenographer. He jogs across the room before he can be accosted into joining, and finds Nedzu in the hall, who quickly excuses himself from a crowd of uniformed officials before clamoring up Shouta's arm to settle on his shoulder.

"Your students?" he asks, voice pitched low in Shouta's ear.

"All fine," he reports. "Kan's with them now. Where's All Might?"

Nedzu nods. His mouth barely moves, “You heard about Shinsou?”

“Mhm. And All Might?”

Nedzu nods again, “Don’t comment. Not to other staff, not to the police. The claim right now is that we’re still unsure if it was a kidnapping or defection.”

“Nedzu,” Shouta bites. “Where is Toshinori?”

He blinks. Looks at Shouta as if for the first time. “Toshinori is—fine. He was found in 1-A. He’s getting treated for shock.”

A relieved breath billows out. Pros don’t tend to have the best self-preservation instincts, but even then, Toshinori puts the rest of them to shame. Shouta wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d been idiotic enough to take the League head-on, frail form and all, with no back-up to speak of.

No back-up, because everyone else had been away for the License Exam. And the League had known, had been counting on it. Because of the traitor.

“You’ll be expected to make a statement. Keep it short,” Nedzu instructs. “I need to speak with the Chief of Police before we go to the press with any of this. We’ll discuss the incident later.”

Shouta nods. He’s right. They still need to play it cool. Though the rage of it still boils hot within him, he knows they’re still being watched.

He lowers Nedzu to the floor, watches, a little numbly, as he re-joins the crowd that makes its way to the boardroom at the end of the hall. In a flash before the doors close, Shouta catches the bank of screens mounted above the conference table. Running newsreels replay the footage of the attack, taglines cycling beneath. *UA Under Attack!* reads the first. Beside it, *League of Villains Strikes Again!* And beneath that, in bolded red, *UA Student Betrays Heroes, Joins League of Villains?*

There’s a flurry of motion at the end of the hall. Shouta spins, fists tight around his weapon.

“I *am* calm,” a voice insists, and Shouta forces clenched hands to loosen. It’s just Toshinori, limbs flailing to shrug off the neon blanket a paramedic attempts to throw around his shoulders. “Please, I’m perfectly fine.”

“Sir,” the paramedic stammers. “If you could just sit down for a moment—”

Toshinori continues to struggle, until dark eyes lock onto Shouta, and his expression clouds like a storm. “Aizawa!” He starts down the hall at a near sprint.

“Sir!” The paramedic starts after him.

“What the hell happened to the boy?” he demands breathlessly, hands latched around Shouta’s shoulders like he could shake the answer out of him.

Shouta dislodges himself, but holds the offending arms still. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Have you seen what’s they’re saying about him?” Toshinori demands. “They’re saying he—”

“All Might,” he says, words purposeful and laced with steel. “Sit down. You’re in shock.”

“Aizawa—”

He twists the grip and pushes him back, collapsing the man like a foldable lawn-chair onto a bench against the wall. He crouches, readjust the blanket that’s fallen loose around his shoulders and breathes, “Not here.”

“What? Aizawa, you can’t just—”

“Shut up. Please shut up.”

“The boy’s in *danger*.”

“Ten minutes,” he bites, and clenches his teeth against the urge to scream. “Meet me on the roof.”

He straightens before Toshinori can protest again, steps back to allow the paramedic closer, and turns away without another word. He lets himself be cornered by the stenographer outside, sits ramrod straight in a hard plastic chair and behind the window of autopilot in his mind and numbly listens to a rattle of questions, answers each in perfectly unhelpful detail and avoids so much as a single mention of Shinsou.

Finished, he checks the time. Two minutes.

The roof is tall enough to sit clear above the chaos below. He can still see the thin cloud of dust that hangs over the radius of the explosion. From this distance, the scope of the damage is more obvious, but the details are lost. Burred. A little quieter. One minute.

He crouches, leans his back against the railing. Rolls down his sleeves and tightens the makeshift scarf of his weapon to conserve heat. The wind's brutal this high, and, on instinct, his hands find the pockets of his jacket, feel the flimsy package inside, forgotten and half-crushed.

Shouta considers. Shrugs. Fishes a lighter from his tool belt and pulls in a long drag. Shit. He hasn't smoked since high school, and the first breath has him lightheaded. His eyes slip closed.

5 seconds, 4 seconds, 3, 2—

“What the fuck is going on?”

The smoke curls up on the exhale, fogging his sight when he opens his eyes to fix them wearily on Toshinori. “You should have kept the blanket. It's freezing up here.”

“This is ridiculous,” Toshinori bristles. There's a fire behind the rasp of his voice, a genuine threat, like if he still had it in him, he'd be in full-fledged hero mode right now. “And you'd better have a damn good explanation for that shit you pulled inside.”

“Quiet down,” he says mildly. “You don't know who's listening.”

This, at last, gives pause. Clenched fists loosen.

“How are your lungs these days?” Shouta asks. “Mind a little second-hand smoke?”

Toshinori makes a face, but finally settles down beside him. Some of the heat goes out of his voice. “That's a disgusting habit.”

“Yeah,” he shrugs. “But it'll look suspicious if we don't have a reason to be up here.”

Toshinori tips his head back to the overcast skies, eyes visibly working through some silent process. After a moment, he turns that same thoughtful gaze over Shouta. Seems to dismantle the sight, take him in piece by piece. “You're being watched.”

He dips his chin in a nod. “Almost undoubtably.”

“Who?”

He takes a long drag, and from behind the smoke, breathes, “The League of Villains planted a mole in UA.”

To his credit, Toshinori doesn’t deny it. He hardly reacts at all. Just tilts his head, silent in thought, and eventually, nods. “Spring break.”

“And USJ,” Shouta hums. “And the mall, back in first term. And—today.”

“Too many to be a coincidence.”

He nods.

“Who else knows?”

“Nedzu. You, now,” he says. “And—Shinsou.”

There’s the crease of a frown. “Why?”

Shouta shrugs. Flicks a bit of ash. “Nedzu didn’t know who he could trust.”

“But he trusted Shinsou?”

“He had—a plan,” Shouta starts. Stops. Searches for the words. “He wanted to—to lure the traitor out, to have them reach out to Shinsou by making him seem susceptible. Easy to manipulate.”

“You used him as bait.” An accusation. Shouta doesn’t deny it.

“Aizawa,” Toshinori breathes, and that old anger is back, self-righteous, boiled pure of hypocrisy. “Of all the reckless, selfish— He’s just a child. A *student*, who it is our sworn duty to protect. To put him in such *danger*—”

He takes another drag, puffs it out harsh and sharp. “Fuckin’ glass houses, All Might.”

Toshinori’s mouth snaps shut. “Excuse me?”

“Yes, it was too much to ask of him. Yes, it was wrong,” he snarls. “But *you*. Do *not*. Get to lecture me about putting a student in danger.”

The silence that follows sits fragile, wavering over the edge of something dangerous. Toshinori closes his eyes. Concession. Shame,

maybe. Shouta doesn't care. He takes another long drag. His own anger flickers, lower, quieter, but no less present. He finishes his first cigarette and pries out another, lets it catch and burn untouched.

"We were using him as bait," he finally admits. "But just bait. He wasn't supposed to—" He waves a hand, the words abandoned.

"He wasn't supposed to go with them," Toshinori translates.

He doesn't respond, doesn't have to. The smoke starts to sting his eyes.

"You're afraid he really did it."

Shouta shrugs. Blinks hard. "He wasn't supposed to go with them."

"He didn't." Toshinori shakes his head. "He was protecting me."

"He—What?"

"Shinsou didn't betray us," Toshinori says urgently. "He was protecting me. He—He must have used himself as a distraction."

"What?" Shouta demands again.

"He was with me when the attack started. That's the last thing I remember." Toshinori grimaces, pained. "They found me in 1-A, hiding in the *closet*."

Shouta's mouth works uselessly, like the words haven't caught up yet. "He—"

"Used his quirk on me."

Shouta turns, and the coiled wires of regret in his chest loosen at the sight. Toshinori meets the stare with unwavering certainty.

"That's why I was so confused. I came to, and suddenly everyone was saying he had betrayed us." Toshinori shakes his head. "But he saved me. A *child* saved *me*." His mouth twists, something between bitter and proud, but Shouta doesn't have the energy to translate. The wave of relief *drowns*.

His head drops, back curled with the weight. Even now, the image burns behind his eyelids—Shinsou, standing tall, reaching inexorably for the hand of a known villain. "Fuck," he breathes, and forces the pieces of his thoughts back together. "Fuck fuck fuck. Okay. Alright.

Fuck.”

Toshinori’s silent, patient as he waits for Shouta to manage the feat of straightening back up. When he does, there’s a small smile there to meet him. “What do we do now?”

We. Thank god.

“I have no idea,” he admits. “But Nedzu might.”

“We should head back in.”

Shouta nods. The smoke is really starting to burn at his eyes, his throat heavy and tight with the taste. He stands, drops the half-finished cigarette and grinds it with his heel. Toshinori was right, it’s a disgusting habit. He wipes his eyes, the hot prickle of tears behind them, and tells himself that’s all it is.

Our Traitor

Chapter Notes

Hello pals and gals! Thank you all for the warm welcome back on the last chapter! Your kudos and comments mean the world to me and I would die for any one of you.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In the main pavilion, Nedzu delivers what amounts to the blandest possible crisis response to the gathered staff and remaining law enforcement personnel. The reports are all in. Six injuries of minimal severity, some 150-million-yen worth of property damage, and one suspected kidnapping. They're all professional enough not to question the last one aloud, but the news cycles are a different story.

They've identified him. Slowed the footage down and frozen it over his face, plastered it on every television and phone screen across Japan. Shinsou Hitoshi's name is on everyone's lips. His picture, public records, social media accounts, family history.

Nedzu forbids the staff from speaking to reporters, in person or online, and instructs them, with little hope, to quell such potential behaviour in their students as well. Repairs to the damaged facilities will begin on Monday, with a 24-hour surveillance in place until then. He caps the speech off with a declaration of their renewed effort to protect their students, their *most sacred charges*, and the words ring deafeningly hollow to Shouta's ears.

There's little room for privacy afterwards. A row of uniforms still awaits Nedzu's ear—insurance agents and PR managers and repair workers all with stakes in the game, and Nedzu hardly manages to elude them long enough for a brief exchange.

"We need to contact Dr. Shinsou," he says quietly. "She'll be upset, possibly even hysteric. You need to make sure she doesn't say anything incriminating."

No, Shouta thinks. What he needs to do is make sure she knows her son is okay. What he needs to do is apologize for ever having made her doubt it.

He sets his jaw and nods.

With instruction to be back in a few hours, Shouta sets out. Taking rooftops instead of roads to Saitama General cuts the travel time, but navigating the storm of reporters in the hospital parking lot takes nearly half as long. He grits his teeth. Looks like they've wasted no time in delving into the Shinsou family background.

He slips through the crowd, barely dodges the security guards in the lobby, and finds the front desk staffed by the same receptionist from his last visit.

"I need to speak with Dr. Shinsou."

She doesn't so much as glance his way. "This building is for patients, not paparazzi. The only way you're seeing anyone is by appointment or medical emergency."

"I'm from UA," he snaps, and earns a few curious stares. He tempers his voice. "I'm here about her son."

She finally looks up, hesitation bleeding into recognition when she takes in his face. "Alright, follow me."

She leads him down the same series of halls as before. Shouta remembers the path well enough. Outside Mrs. Shinsou's office, he stops, turns away to offer a modicum of privacy as the woman gives a soft knock. There's no response. The lights are low, blinds pulled tight over the tinted glass.

She cracks the open the door. "Haru?"

"Karen?" comes a quiet voice. "This is insane. Did you see the parking lot? I can't—I can't even see my car. They're all standing around it."

"I know, hun," the woman says gently. "But there's someone here to see you."

A pause, and her voice flickers with panic. "I'm not talking to any reporters."

"He's not a reporter." She steps back, beckons Shouta forward and pushes the door the rest of the way open.

Mrs. Shinsou is frozen, half-risen from the chair behind her desk. Her lab coat is strewn in a heap on the floor, her hair loose and frazzled. Her eyes go wide at Shouta's entrance, then almost as quickly narrow into furious focus, mouth falling open—

Only to freeze. Her gaze darts from Shouta to the other woman and back. “Right. Thank you, Karen. I think I can take it from here.”

Karen casts a lingering glance between them, but slowly withdraws as asked. Shouta pulls the door shut behind her. Mrs. Shinsou stares.

“Please forgive me,” he breathes, and drops into a bow, gaze burning into the floor. “Please forgive me. I’m so—I—” he loses the words, swallows back the emotion that chokes them and musters them back. “My inattention and ignorance have put your son in danger. What happened today was not our intention, but there is no excuse for having failed to prevent it, and I—I’m so sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.”

The words are met with silence. Shouta risks a glance.

Her back is half-turned, shoulders tight and hitching with shallow breaths. One hand pressed over her mouth, the other white-knuckled on the back of her chair.

Shouta straightens, stomach sinking with dread. “Doctor?”

“Have you heard what they’re saying about him?” she says, almost too quiet to hear. “It’s horrible.”

“Mrs. Shinsou—”

“Have you heard?”

“I—Yes,” he admits. “I have.”

“They’re saying he’s a villain.”

“I know.”

“I was angry,” she says. She still hasn’t faced him, her voice the only thing bridging the emptiness between them. “I was so angry. How dare they say that about him? But then I watched it. They won’t stop showing it, over and over, so I finally watched it. And watched it. And —” she stops. Breathes. “He took that villain’s hand. They offered their hand, and he took it.”

“I know.”

“They’re saying my kid is a villain,” she says again.

“I know.”

“Aizawa,” she says. “Is my kid a villain?”

“No,” he says, and pours every fucking ounce of certainty in his body behind the word. “Haru, *no*. He isn’t.”

At last, she faces him, and her expression is a storm of cold fury. “Then explain to me *exactly* why he took that villain’s hand. Explain to me why *the fuck* he would take that villain’s hand.”

Shouta hesitates, forming the words, and Mrs. Shinsou leaps for the kill. “Did you make him do it?”

“No,” he says quickly. “Shinsou acted alone.”

“Did your boss make him do it?” she presses. “Is there *any* reason why he might have believed that to be required of him?”

“No,” Shouta stresses. “We—We think he—He did it to protect All Might.”

“To protect *All Might*?”

“He was the main target of the attack,” he explains. “UA was understaffed today, and the traitor must have let the League know. All Might’s powerless. They would have killed him, but—Shinsou led them away.”

“By pretending to be on their side.”

“Exactly.”

“God,” Mrs. Shinsou says, like it’s been punched out of her. She presses her knuckles into her eyes. “What an idiot.”

He blinks. “Ma’am?”

“Of course. No, no, *of course*. Protecting *All Might*, of course, what else could it *possibly* have been?” Her knuckles dig in harder. She *laughs*, almost hysterical. “You know, this is exactly what he wanted. And exactly what we wouldn’t give him.”

The realization washes in, but there’s little relief in the weight of it. “A chance to see the mission through.”

“To be a hero,” she corrects. She shakes her head, and there’s a smile there, mirthless, bittersweet. “He’s always had this *insane* complex, this—this crazy voice in his head that tells him he has to do whatever

it takes to prove everyone wrong about his quirk. That's what all this has been about, you know? That's all he wanted." She throws her hands in the air, a surrender. "And if we weren't going to let him, he was going to find a way to do it alone."

"And now he has," Shouta says. "Now the League thinks he's on their side. Now they'll trust him."

"And he'll find out who the traitor is," she finishes. "And prove us all wrong."

It's a bitter stab of relief and regret—a lightness in his chest that rises with the cemented certainty that Shinsou didn't betray them, even after everything, even after—*You're not a hero. You can't be*. But the regret is just as quick on its heels, sinks like hooks beneath his skin, a wound that scrapes raw to the bone, and drags him back under the wave. "It's my fault," he says. "I pushed him to this."

Mrs. Shinsou's breath trembles at the admission, shoulders caving a little with the weight of it. Her expression is unreadable, eyes damp and bright with a pain Shouta can only fathom. Her son, her child. Risking his *life*, and for what? A system that never believed in him. A system that, through Shouta's indifference, took advantage of him.

He would deserve it, if she were to focus the laser of her wrath and every ounce of blame onto him, to strip him down to the festering wound of guilt beneath the veneer of his heroism and expose every way it will never been enough to make up for what he's done. He would deserve it, and more.

But she sighs, and the cold certainty of that blame dissipates, just a little. "You weren't the first person to doubt him." And there's a hurt there, a regret of her own. But she breathes through it, long and hard, and then, with steel in her voice, "So how are we going to help my idiot son prove us wrong?"

Between Mrs. Shinsou's knowledge of the hospital grounds and Shouta's stealth training, they make it the necessary few blocks away to call a cab without alerting any of the reporters still hunting like bloodhounds for any sight of the doctor. The taxi gets them as far as UA, and Shouta's hero badge gets them the rest of the way in,

deflecting staff and uniformed officers alike as he guides Mrs. Shinsou to Nedzu's office.

To his surprise, they're not alone.

Toshinori makes a frantic pace of the room, red-faced and breathless and clearly mid-rant, but he freezes as they enter. Nedzu, seated at his desk and looking slightly worse for wear, raises a weary brow Shouta's way, as if to ask, *You told him?*

Shouta doesn't dignify it with a response. He drains his face of all expression and takes up his usual position, silent and sentinel against the wall. Nedzu can kiss his ass.

Toshinori quickly smooths himself out, offering Mrs. Shinsou a polite introduction and bow. "I wish we could have met under better circumstances."

She nods. "I'm glad you're unharmed."

"Thanks to your son," he says gravely, and shoots Nedzu a glare. "I'm grateful, of course, but I wish he hadn't had to do it."

"What's done is done," she sighs, and turns her focus to Nedzu as well. "So? The plan?"

If Nedzu's surprised by her brisk tone, he hides it well, quickly launching into an explanation. "Having finally had time to carefully consider today's events, I believe our smartest move would be to wait until the consequences of these events have settled. Now before you get angry with me, hear me out. Staging an attempted rescue at this point could be dangerous for Shinsou's cover."

"His cover," she says.

"As our traitor."

There's an unspoken danger in her voice. "*Our* traitor."

"From a purely logistical standpoint, this is an amazing opportunity. Not what we originally planned for, certainly, but we can still work with it," Nedzu doesn't mince words, tone plain, factual. "Shinsou is living under the League of Villains, but is loyal to us," he says plainly. "He has, in essence, given us exactly the same secret weapon the League holds over us."

Shouta's stomach twists—concern or resent or something between the two. He's not surprised—this is *exactly* what he would have expected of Nedzu—words somehow both perfectly plain and utterly gloating. And the most infuriating part of it all is that, really, Nedzu's *not wrong*. Hell, if Shinsou were here, he would probably be right beside him, firm in agreement. This is the opportunity he gave them. This is exactly what he wanted.

"This is ridiculous," Toshinori starts. "Shinsou Hitoshi is a *literal* prisoner right now. A kidnapping victim! And you want to let him continue to be so?"

"I don't believe he is," Nedzu counters. "He went with them of his own volition. Therefore, they trust him, and have absolutely no reason to hurt or imprison him. And once they fully induct him into their organization, he will not only be given more freedom—at which point it will be safer to conduct a rescue attempt—but he will have invaluable information about the League and its weaknesses."

He glances around the room, carefully, at each of them in turn. "I understand that this is a delicate situation, but Shinsou has put himself in it for our benefit. Not the mission he signed up for, but the mission he has given himself. We would be doing a disservice to his bravery not to take advantage of it." His eyes land on Mrs. Shinsou, and don't move. "Nonetheless, before he is our traitor or even our student, he is your child. My own opinion notwithstanding, the decision of how we proceed lies with you."

Shouta sets his jaw. Just like Nedzu to deliver a grand speech about how running damage control would be a *disservice* to Shinsou's *bravery*, then ask the person most likely to want that what they think. Morally justifiable only by a technicality. Still, he's asking, which is. Something.

"I'm not an idiot. Don't pretend you're giving me a choice," Mrs. Shinsou says plainly, and there's that cold weight behind the words, behind the anger. A sick understanding of her own uselessness. She holds up a hand before Nedzu can interrupt. "Don't. Because there *isn't* a choice here. We tried to stop him before and we failed. We pushed him even further away."

A ghost of smile dances across Nedzu's face, and Shouta's stomach plummets with an understanding of his own. "Then it's settled?"

"It's settled." Mrs. Shinsou nods, shoulders set, and seals their fate.

“We work with him.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is finally back to that sweet Hitoshi POV and I am!!!
big excite!!!!

Completely Alone

Hitoshi plunges into darkness feet first. The world drops away in swooping freefall, shadows that swallow him up in frigid wave. He hits the ground, knees buckling, then straightening as the darkness curls off his shoulders like steam, leaving him gasping in the sudden cold.

It takes only a moment to recognize the same barn as before. The building yawns, old walls creaking as the wind howls through the gaps in the paneling. Heart like thunder, Hitoshi waits, listens. Hears only the wind.

“Hello?”

No response.

He turns a slow circle but doesn't drift from the spot, rooted in indecision. He's—alone?

He flexes his hands, pulls them to his chest. He can still feel the phantom touch of the hand that dragged him under—Kurogiri, firm and inexorable. There's no way would they take him along only to dump him here alone. His eyes drift to the shadows, searching. Are they watching, waiting to see what he'll do?

Shit.

What is he doing?

A small noise escapes him, soft, scared. Another threatens to follow, but he swallows it back. He knows exactly what he's doing—what he's been doing all along. He's being a hero. Just like before. He's being a hero by pretending to be a villain.

He shakes his head, like he could physically throw off the doubt, breathes long and low and watches the fog of his breath scatter in the air. Does it again, and counts the seconds until he calms. The mask falls like a second skin—icy indifference, a blank canvas stare—perfected by months of wear. It freezes over him like the wind that cuts knives through the air.

He's being a hero.

So *be* a goddamn hero.

His gaze roves the barn in a slow turn. Unlike his last visit, he takes his time, eyes lingering where the shadows gather, but it's all perfectly benign. A barren floor strewn with loose straw, stiff and dry from the cold; a sliding door, padlocked from the inside. He moves to wall to peer out between the boards and sees nothing but a wasteland of a rice field, quiet under a sheen of frost, the treeline hazy in the distance. Not a single road or building in sight. This must be some sort of way-station for the League. Maybe something to bridge the distance limits for Kurogiri's teleportation—if such a thing even exists. The media's been debating it for years.

The thought snaps off at the sound of feet against the floorboards. He jolts, turns in time to watch the quirk in question recede, and three figures emerge from the dark.

The first is Kurogiri. The other, he doesn't recognize. And the third—

The third is—

Shigaraki Tomura. Skeletal and sickly pale, lips cracked around a scowl, spidery limbs hanging off his frame at sharp angles, like something just shy of human. There's no sweeping entrance or towering charade—Hitoshi would hardly recognize him as the League's leader but the way other two step to the side. Giving room for an attack or a closer inspection, Hitoshi doesn't know, but Shigaraki moves to do neither. He doesn't even seem to breathe. The single crimson eye visible between the clawed hand across his face pins Hitoshi slowly, calmly—a dangerous, roving gaze, like a spider watching its prey hang by the noose of its web, a patience in the certainty of its venom.

Kurogiri speaks, but the noise drowns in the roar of blood in Hitoshi's ears. He gestures to the second man, skipping Shigaraki entirely. With a jolt, Hitoshi forces his gaze to follow.

“—our broker, Giran.” He barely catches the name. An older man—forties or fifties, face weathered and hair silver-lined, an unlit cigarette dangling between a chipped and tobacco-blackened grin. Hitoshi nods haltingly, words still stuck somewhere at the bottom of his churning stomach.

“Kid,” the man—Giran—says in greeting. He cracks his neck, pulls a lighter from a pocket and makes a show of lighting up, perfectly casual behind weight of his assessing gaze. “Got a phone?”

His hand shoots to his pocket before he remembers he doesn't even

have it on him. "I left it," he croaks out. "At home."

Giran eyes him. Takes a long inhale and puffs out, "Kurogiri?"

Kurogiri moves in, crowding, hands outstretched, and it takes everything in Hitoshi not to flinch from the touch that methodically begins to pat him down. "You understand, of course, we must take some precautions."

"Right." He puts as much indifference as physically possible behind the words, arms raised in compliance. This close, Kurogiri smells of sweat and smoke, a hint of cologne. His hands are cold, but firm beneath their wispy edges. It goes on for a few seconds, then, "Take off your shoes."

He kicks them off, a little awkwardly. Socks, like his phone, were one of the forgotten causalities of his mad sprint from home this morning. Straw prickles at his bare soles for only a second before they go numb, the chill of the floorboards racing up his legs to settle in his spine. The fine hairs along his arms spring to attention and he can feel Kurogiri's breath, disproportionately hot, down the back of his neck. If he starts to shake, he hopes they blame the cold.

Finally, Kurogiri moves back. He returns wordlessly to the others, giving nothing away. The silence stretches thin, their gazes hard, watching, *waiting*, and beneath the weight, Hitoshi's grip on the cliff-edge of calm starts to peel back, finger by painstaking finger. They're all—they're all just *staring* at him, like they expect him to explode, or—or break down, or—do *something*. Something to reveal himself, to unravel himself to the core, to lay out the pieces at their feet and pray they'll choose to keep more than they kick aside. And how the fuck is he supposed to do that when he doesn't even know what they're looking for, what they see, what they *want*? Do they want him scared and vulnerable? Eager and easy to manipulate? Do they want him furious and ready for vengeance against those who have wronged him?

Work with however they offer themselves to you, Nedzu had said. Endear them to you.

But how? *How*, when Kurogiri's a mask of smoke and too-perfect composure, and Giran's lazy grin does nothing to hide the calculation behind his eyes, Shigaraki's fingers twitch with a threat that crawls through the air between them and settles like a knife at his throat, pressing deeper with every second. When they're all just *staring* at

him, like prey, like some kind of fucking alien, like he's not even human, barefoot and powerless and shivering in the cold?

"They made me feel like I wasn't even a person."

The admission slips out as though stolen, quiet, fatal. A whisper of voice that cuts a hole clean through him. "They made me feel like I didn't matter, like nothing I did mattered. Not how nice I was, or how hard I worked. Because I was always—I was always just a *villain*. They never gave me the chance to be anything else." He leans into the hurt of it, the *truth* of it, the paper-thin lines each word slices along his skin, until he aches with it, until it draws out the rage behind his teeth. "I thought it would be different at UA, but it wasn't. It was like, from day one, they *expected* me to join you. Like they thought just because I *could* do something terrible, I inevitably *would*."

He would, and he did, and now, he's here. Just like everyone always thought. His jaw clenches back a snarl of rage, breathing hard through the weight of that wound. He's here, and nobody knows just how wrong they were.

But he's going to show them.

His eyes flicker up from where they'd fallen, the shame that weighed them down shrugged off like a burdensome coat. He *is* going to show them.

Giran watches the display with an arched brow, lips hooked in a knowing smile. "We do this," he says, "and there's no going back."

"I understand."

He takes a pull from the cigarette. "You're what, fifteen?"

"Sixteen."

Giran nods. "The League ain't a school. No kids around. No teachers either, telling you what to do. But there are rules. Expectations. You step out of line, you're gonna feel it."

He swallows the stutter of his pulse, the undercurrent of threat. "I understand."

Giran trades a look with Kurogiri, then a longer one with Shigaraki. Neither react, but Giran still smiles, picks the cigarette from between his teeth and tosses it to the hay. "Right then. Let's do this."

The straw catches within seconds, a small flame crackling in the dry air, leaping tall to swallow the shadows and any trace of their presence they carried. There's no outstretched hand this time—that decision long since made—but Kurogiri steps forward, warpgate breathing over him like a sigh, and as the fire spreads around them, his face flickers into a smile of his own. “Welcome home, Shinsou.”

They're released into a proper room this time. A bedroom? It's dim, but warm, and the shock of it is enough to knock the pins and needles of sensation back through his frigid frame. His toes curl into carpet as he blinks to clear the fog, catches sight of a bed and a dresser, then jolts at the slam of a door. He turns to the sound, and sees only Kurogiri remains. The silence seems to echo.

He swallows, and when Kurogiri doesn't yet move, casts a more careful gaze around.

There are two doors—the one Shigaraki and Giran left through, and another that stands half-open, showing the cracked tiled floors of what's presumably a washroom. Besides the bed and dresser, there's a TV stand against one wall and small window on the other, but most of the light comes off a single lamp in the opposite corner. A wall-mounted heater groans with ancient machinery, hot air heavy with the scent of stale cigarette smoke. Outside the window, loose siding clangs in the breeze.

“You'll stay here for now,” Kurogiri says, and gestures haltingly about. There's an odd note to his voice, to the way he claps his hands together like he isn't sure what to do with them. The image cuts a stark relief against the threat of his stature. “Make yourself comfortable. I'll see to replacing your things.”

His things, right. His whole life. “Sure.”

Kurogiri nods. “You've had a long day. Rest up. We'll show you around tomorrow.”

That's not technically true. He only woke up a few hours ago, though it feels like days have passed since he stood at the gates of UA. Exhausted or not, he doubts he'll be getting much sleep tonight. But he nods, watches as a cloak of shadows crawls its way up and over

Kurogiri, and seems to hang in the air long after he's vanished beneath it.

Alone, then. Finally.

He stands, and waits.

Nothing happens.

Right. Okay. It's done. He's here. He made it.

Holy. Shit.

The relief hits like a high—he made it, *he* made it—a wave of near-delirious laughter that threatens to bubble out, a riptide of giddy disbelief that that swells over him, then all to quickly pulls him *down*, drowns away and leaves him cold, gasping for breath. Holy *shit*, he's *here*, wherever here is—a satellite base or a main hideout or, or *something*—and he's surrounded and so desperately out of his league it makes his vision spin.

And he did it *alone*.

He isn't stupid enough to think for one second to let his guard down. Alone or not, this is the League of Villains. This is their *base*. For all that it looks like a moldy old hotel room, he might as well be spot-lit on stage. Cameras, someone with a quirk that lets them see from afar, hell, Kurogiri could be listening right outside the door for the first hint of a breakdown.

He moves gingerly to the bed. Sits. Stands again, when one comes flying in to slaughter him. Then sits again, runs his hands through his hair, tries to project: calloused yet vulnerable teenager. Again, if anyone's watching, there's no sign. Minutes pass, and he takes to pacing, then investigates. First, the adjoined bathroom (which, *gross*), then, the TV (it turns on, surprisingly, but shows only static), and lastly, he drifts over to peer through the window.

It's loosely boarded from the outside, and the pane slides open only about an inch. The glass is fogged from the cold, his hands leaving finger prints that melt and smudge in icy rivulets, marking his touch.

He's on the second or third floor. Not enough of a fall to kill him, but plenty enough to hurt. The view is beyond all scraggly woods, trees stripped bare of leaves and snow pristine between them, slopping ever downwards and out of sight. He doesn't know how far Kurogiri's quirk

can travel, but they're definitely not in Musutafu anymore. Maybe somewhere up the nearby mountains? He squints, and through the trees, spots the hazy twinkle of lights. Cars, maybe. A highway? The snowfall picks up before he can get a better look, whiting out the scene, and it's hard to tell much of anything after that.

The heater coughs and hums, but the chill lingers long after he's closed the window. With nothing else to do, Hitoshi sits.

He's completely alone.

The rest of the evening is spent in much the same fashion. The sky beyond the window gets darker, and the shadows grow long and strange. The heater sputters on and off a few times, and eventually, the chill forces Hitoshi beneath the covers, still fully dressed. The sheets smell of dust and disuse, and the frame creaks like it threatens to snap in half with every twitch of movement.

He lies there. And lies there.

Eventually, he has to try to sleep.

The light spilling under the door never goes off, and neither do the sounds of footsteps and distant voices beyond. He tries to count the seconds between them—are they doing some sort of guard rounds?—but they're too far apart for any sort of pattern, and with little else to do, exhaustion takes over.

He jolts awake at intervals, lathed in sweat—to the low murmur of voices outside the door, to the muffled sounds from somewhere in the building beyond, to the howl of the wind and the clang of the loose siding against the window, to nothing but the half-remembered whisper of black smoke and pristine snow. By the time the haze of sunlight finally trickles into the room, he's managed a grand total of maybe three hours of fitful sleep.

He's just sat up, groggy and not yet daring to move, when the door crashes open and sends him into near cardiac arrest.

It's a woman he's never seen before, muscular and hard-eyed. "Clothes," she says, gruff, and tosses a plastic bag at the foot of the

bed.

Hitoshi stares, wills down the spike of adrenaline shot through him like a bullet, and manages an equally rough, “Thanks.”

The woman doesn’t leave. Uncertain, Hitoshi climbs out of bed, keenly aware of his dishevelled and entirely too vulnerable state. He picks up the bag, stands awkwardly with it in hand.

She eyes him up and down. “They weren’t kidding, huh? A UA kid.”

It’s the most he’s gotten out of a single person so far. He fumbles with the bag, shifts his feet, risks, “Am I the youngest here?”

She gives a huff. “This ain’t exactly a daycare.”

“I just meant, you’d think there would be more, um, disillusioned youths,” he tries again. “You know, ‘cause of how fucked up the whole hero system is.”

“Uh-huh,” she says, unmoved. “Get dressed. Can’t have you walking around like that.” The door closes behind her.

Alright, so. Not exactly the intel he was looking for, but it’s something, he supposes.

Maybe she’s just not talkative, maybe she’s been told not to say anything. Probably the latter, what with the way they have him locked away to his room. They clearly don’t trust him yet. Seems unlikely they ever will, if they just plan to keep him on time-out, but he remembers Kurogiri’s original pitch—how he’d vowed to nurture his abilities, to help him grow. Trust like that isn’t built in a day.

He swallows his frustration and dresses. There are shoes and socks, thank fuck. Jeans and a T-shirt, a hoodie over top. Dark, solid colours—nothing flashy. They’re brand new, too. Still tagged and everything. Which means—well, which either means Kurogiri planned for his arrival or somehow has a stockpile of clothes always at the ready. He can’t imagine the League paying a visit to the local strip mall would go over very well for anyone involved. So—what? He tries to see what Aizawa would see—not just clothes, but clues. So, they’ve got supplies. They’ve got—by the price tags—money. And they’ve got people who can *get* them, people who can buy and sell without raising eyes. Not exactly *identity of the traitor*-level info, but he marks it down as something worth looking into.

He spares a second to adjust himself in the mirror, splashing cold water to return some of the colour to his face. But minutes later, the woman has yet to return. He presses an ear to the door and hears only silence. He steps back, heaves one last breath to school his face, and pries open the door.

Outside is a long hallway, all tacky carpet and patterned panelling, a broken fluorescent tube buzzing loudly above. It's spotted at intervals with doors just like his. He was right in his judgement of the room, then. They're definitely in some kind of hotel.

More importantly, the woman is gone. No sign of any of the people he heard last night either. He doesn't know if that's a good or bad thing, if this is some kind of test or if they genuinely don't care if he takes off exploring.

God. Nothing's even *happened* yet and this place is already fucking with his head.

He steps out. Nothing happens. He closes the door behind him. Still nothing. Okay. Yeah. Great.

He starts to walk. Down the hall, then around the corner and down a second hall, this one nearly identical but with windows. Outside, the snow is piled in banks, revealing a cleared-off parking lot, surrounded by the same sparse woods that covered his side of the building. He leans closer to get a better look

"Hey, asshole!"

Hitoshi starts, heart in his throat. There's a man at the end of the hall, marching towards him. "The fuck you doing out?" he demands, and Hitoshi blanks, the white static of panic—fucking *fuck*, his first move and he's already blown it—but before the man reaches him, a door opens between them, cutting him off mid-rampage. Out steps a suit-glad figure.

"Giran!" the man says. "The traitor's fuckin' around."

"Is he now?" Giran spares the man an undecipherable look, then turns it on Hitoshi, brow arched. "That's all, Jun," he says without turning back.

The man sputters. "What, so you're just gonna let him—"

"Jun," Giran says, and there's a cool layer of threat beneath the name.

The man—Jun, he supposes, committing it memory—huffs and sets pace once again, knocking Hitoshi's shoulder as he passes. Hitoshi holds ground. Giran watches, and after another second of appraisal, beckons.

He leads Hitoshi down a stairwell at the end of the hall, then down again, until they reach what appears to be the basement. It's warmer here, the air stuffy with the remnants of a woodfire and cigarette smoke. A few paces bring them to some sort of bar. The ceiling sits low, all knotted wood and exposed beams, mismatched bar stools and a carpet littered with a variety of questionable stains. Soft light filters in through the snowbanks piled up against the windows, casting the room in a tired glow that illuminates every scratch on the glossy bar top. It's an entirely different feeling from the room upstairs—less drafty, less empty. It feels almost lived-in.

Through the bar and down another short hall, he's hit with the smell of warm meats and the clatter of cutlery. It seems impossibly benign, but then, he supposes, even villains eat breakfast. They're not headed to join though—Giran stops at another door before the kitchen, old hinges creaking open into a small, windowless room with a single oaken table. The walls are lined floor-to-ceiling, towering glass cabinets and shelves of glistening bottles. Giran gestures for him to sit, then circles around to one of cabinets.

"What's your poison?" he tosses over his shoulder.

Hitoshi fumbles, hesitant to admit his inexperience. Would a villainous delinquent know their way around booze? Probably. But Giran would smell the lie a mile away. He settles for honesty. "I've never, uh—I don't—"

Giran's already got a bottle in hand. "Ever had whiskey?"

"No," Hitoshi says, and has to bite back the reflexive *sir*.

Giran grins a little funny, like he heard it anyway. He uncaps the bottle, turns to the cabinet again and returns with two glasses, which he makes a show of filling, each about an inch. "Yamazaki, single malt, 2005. Won't find one of these easily nowadays. The distillery went out of business in the 20's," he announces, almost proudly, and slides a glass Hitoshi's way. "But you can get your hands on just about anything if you're willing to get 'em a little dirty."

Hitoshi considers the glass, the liquid gold lapping gently at its sides. It catches the low light, scatters it in strange patterns across the table,

and it's easy to lift it to his lips, easy to let his eyes slide closed as he tilts it back. It explodes bitter on the back of his throat, carving a trail of heat that lingers and sits like embers in his empty stomach. He can still feel Giran's gaze, and doesn't even try to hold back the wince. The shit's *nasty*.

He lowers the glass. "Ugh."

"Not what you were expecting?"

Fuck, okay. A loaded question if he's ever heard one. "It might," he croaks, "take some getting used to."

Giran smirks, circles the table and finally settles in the seat across him, like he's deigned Hitoshi worth his time after all. He raises his own glass but doesn't drink, just tilts it side to side, the glisten trapped like a living thing in amber.

"You know, some people think drinking is all about the feeling," he says, the picture of nonchalance. "Never mind how bitter it is going down, so long as it achieves the desired effect, that's all that matters."

Hitoshi chews on this a second. Risks, "From the state of the bar out there, I'd most of the people here probably agree."

"I'm more curious if it's what you think, Shinsou."

Right. Obviously. He shrugs, mimicking that same nonchalance. "Doesn't hurt to cut loose once and a while."

The lazy smirk shrinks a fraction, eyes narrowed.

Hitoshi scrambles to correct. "I mean, I probably need more experience. Before, uh. Before I can really make a judgement. On the liquor, that is. Not the—" he gestures around, "Not the rest of it. The rest of it I'm sure about."

"Mm." Giran considers this another second. "See, I tend to think it only gets better with age."

Hitoshi swallows. "The liquor?"

"The liquor," he laughs, "and the *rest of it*." He leans back, slaps his glass down on the table unfinished and says, "But that's not what we're really here to talk about. We're here to talk about you."

Right. He straightens. This is the important part. "What do you want

to know?"

"You've made it clear you wanna join us. But why should we want you to?" He smiles slow, a predator with teeth bared. "What can you do for us, Shinsou?"

Brainwashing, he thinks, the medical file sharp in his mind. *Allows to me command others when given a verbal response. Only activates when willed.* But that's not what Giran's looking for, is it?

"I want to be heard," he says instead, simply, truthfully. "I want the people who didn't listen to regret it."

"And what are you willing to do to achieve that?"

What is he willing to do? What *isn't* he willing to do? Work secretly, illegally, play a part so completely it invaded every moment of his day and sleepless second of his night, isolate himself from everyone he knew, train so hard he ached for days afterwards. Join the League of Villains—publicly, irrevocably, for the whole world to see. Anything, to prove himself.

"Anything," he says, and means it. "I'd do anything."

The smile creeps wider, wolf-sharp and bloodied with its catch. Giran hums, low and satisfied. "You'll be heard," he promises. "We'll make sure of it. Gonna play it slow with you for a bit first. Get you comfortable, see where you fit best. That gonna be a problem?"

Hitoshi shakes his head. "I can be patient."

"Good," Giran says, and leans back into a stretch. Then, he stands. "Then let's test that patience."

Hitoshi eyes the glass, still full on the table. "You're not going to finish that?"

"Please, kid, it's not even noon," Giran smirks. "Have some class."

Hitoshi blinks, flushes, and—wait, is Giran teasing him? Like, friendly teasing? That's good, right?

No time to think of it now. He stands to follow. Back in the hall, his nose twitches in the direction of the kitchens, the liquor in his stomach having done something to awaken it, but Giran leads him back the way they came instead.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get something sent up for you,” he says at the unspoken question. “I have to go over a few things with everyone before we can let you in with them.”

Hitoshi doesn’t protest. Distantly, he wonders if the things he needs to *go over* have anything to do with his quirk. When Mr. Compress and Spinner ran into him at UA, they knew better than to both speak. But just now, Giran didn’t hesitate over their conversation. Seems awful trusting, but then again, it would have been incredibly stupid of him to try anything during their first conversation, with no backup to speak of, in the heart of the League’s base.

Honestly, the thought of using his quirk hadn’t even crossed his mind. People might not remember what they’re doing when they’re brainwashed, but they sure as hell know it *happened*. It’s far too early in the game to make a move that big. For now, he needs to lay low, learn what he can, the old-fashioned way. For now, like he promised, he needs to be patient.

Giran walks him back the stairwell, but doesn’t lead him up. There’s a loading bay of some kind at the base, a heavy steel door he can tell leads outside just by the chill it radiates. “I trust you’ll find your way back without getting into any trouble,” he says, and pulls a pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

“Sure.” But Hitoshi doesn’t move. He eyes the cigarettes, then the door, a thought slowly forming. Giran might let him outside if he smokes too. Maybe he can get a better look around, try to figure out exactly where they are.

“Actually, wait,” he starts. “Can I—”

Giran ignores him, lights up and tosses the lighter in the same breath. Hitoshi fumbles with the catch, then again when Giran throws the whole pack after it. “You can smoke in your room.”

Like that, he’s gone. The door swings open with a blast of winter air and locks closed again with a heavy click, leaving Hitoshi with a pack of cigarettes he doesn’t want and blinking at empty space.

The message is about as clear as a slap in the face. He may have passed the first test, but he’s still an outsider. He sighs, looks at the pack, and with a shrug, pockets it. Fuck. He might need them after all.

His work has only begun.

Fresh Blood

Chapter Notes

Hello my dears!

School somehow managed to sneak up on me AGAIN, and I find that VERY rude. I am in my fourth year of university and suffering greatly at all hours of the day, so updates might slow down somewhat in the near future. Nonetheless, I had a great deal of fun with this chapter, and I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

Also, I've been toying with the idea of making a music playlist for this fic. If anyone has any recommendations or would be interested in such a thing, let me know!

As ever, I look forward to hearing your thoughts <3

The morning drags by to the point of near-physical pain.

It's about as exciting as being locked in a prison cell, with all of the familiarity of a bedroom time-out. He searches the room again, for *what* he doesn't know, but it's the same as last time. Ratty old sheets on a ratty old bed, shower stall with mould all but fossilized into the grout, dusty TV that coughs out nothing but static, frequency just sharp enough to sink hooks into the tension behind his eyes.

He watches the sun rise, then dip low toward the horizon—the shadows of snow-capped trees yawning overhead to swallow his view. Beyond the swell of the mountains below, the same lights he saw yesterday come on, glittering with the promise of civilization. And throughout it all, not a damn thing happens.

It's frustrating, to say the least. But more than that, it's a mindfuck. Is he *supposed* to stay here? They *told* him to, sure, but did they really expect him to listen? Would a disillusioned, angry teenager listen? Or would he storm out there with guns blazing, raging at being told what to do, at being treated like an untrustworthy brat?

And besides, aren't these people supposed to be trying to convert him? Make him feel welcomed and understood? How's he supposed to want to be a villain when all they've done so far is treat him like a criminal?

He thinks back on his training, on Nedzu's imparted wisdom. Scared but not too scared? Eager without being over-eager? Neither are exactly clear-cut directions. So—it's up to him?

Fuck. He should go.

In his cowardice, he stays.

It's a sharp knock that finally snaps him from his indecision. Hitoshi jolts to his feet as though shocked, hands clasped guiltily. The loose threads of the sheets he's been worrying at for hours tumble to the floor.

The door crashed open without invitation. It's a face he recognizes—Jun.

"Food," he says curtly, and disappears from the doorway before Hitoshi can so much as blink in response.

He opens his mouth, then snaps it shut, and treks dutifully after him. Jun's already around the corner and out of sight, but Hitoshi retraces his earlier steps through the winding halls without pause. He's hardly spared a thought for food since his hastily finished breakfast this morning, stomach still twisted in seemingly permanent knots of worry, but he's not about to pass up another chance for interaction.

From the top of the stairs, raucous voices rise to meet him, tobacco and smoke thick on his tongue as he sucks down a final steeling breath. The wood groans with each step down, too-loudly announcing his arrival, but he presses on, eyes low, knuckles white around the railing.

The bar's completely different from the last time he saw it—fully occupied now, for one, with lights low and air heavy, body heat and the spice of liquor. The voices hush as he breaches the doorway, hard stares flashing with no hint of subtlety. Pack of wolves, he thinks unbidden, hackles raised at the sight of prey, and his feet stutter to a stop, pinned, placid expression twitching in its death throes. His eyes skip across the room—he counts six, seven, eight of them—and tries not to look at any of them in particular, tries not to look at them at all—scared but not too scared, *not too sacred*—and he stares straight ahead, at nothing, at shadow, at the TV mounted over the bar, muted over an image of—

Nedzu. Nedzu's on the screen. An interview? No—a press conference. Text scrolls across the image—*UA Principal Speaks Out on Student's*

Disappearance.

“Shinsou.” He jumps at the voice, eyes landing on Kurogiri, who beckons him across the floor. He taps the empty stool beside him. Empty, where he swears Shigaraki *just* was. “Please take a seat.”

He does, mechanically, eyes roaming for Shigaraki, who seems to have vanished between one second and the next. The others track the movement—Mr. Compress, Spinner, the woman from yesterday, others he doesn’t recognize. Kurogiri waits until he’s settled, then turns his attention back to the TV. A few other gazes follow, tension lifting in increments, and Hitoshi does the same, sagging at the relief of the distraction.

The sound cuts in. “—that unfortunately, we weren’t fully prepared for such an outright attack.”

“Got that right,” laughs a chipper voice. “They never saw us coming.”

“I assure you that we have since taken all measures necessary to ensure the safety of our students and staff,” Nedzu says. “We are also fully cooperating with the authorities investigating the disappearance of one of our first-year students, Shinsou Hitoshi—”

A shout and a whistle.

“—who we believe may have been coerced to leave the premises with the villains, or otherwise taken against his will.”

Nedzu’s barely gotten the words out and the room around him erupts—reporters on their feet, microphones aloft. “Are you saying he was kidnapped?” one demands. “Do you really expect us to believe that?”

“We’ve all seen the footage. What really happened?”

“Sir, is it true the student may have left willingly?”

“How do you respond to the allegations that the student actually assisted the League of Villains in their attack?”

Nedzu steps back from the podium, gaze darting briefly off-screen, and a strange, cold feeling begins to crawl up from Hitoshi’s stomach. “I—I cannot confirm anything at this time, and will refrain from comments while the investigation is underway.”

“Sir, can you tell us—”

“Those will be all the questions on Shinsou I’m taking at the moment.”

The feeling grows as the reporters continue to lob questions, twisting tight between his ribs. Nedzu dodges each, but there’s something increasingly unsteady about the act, something—*wrong*. Nedzu, who loves nothing more than to capture an audience, is losing them completely.

“Until given proof otherwise, we are working under the assumption that Shinsou is innocent,” Nedzu says with finality. But everyone has tells. Everyone. And Nedzu’s *lying*.

Nausea roils up like a wave. Nedzu doesn’t know. Nedzu doesn’t *know*.

His eyes dart across the screen, but Aizawa’s nowhere to be seen, even as the conference lurches to an end and Nedzu shuffles quickly backstage. The shot changes to a still image—Hitoshi’s face, dead-eyed disinterest against a blank backdrop—his UA I.D. picture. The tagline beneath it changes too. *Shinsou Hitoshi, UA traitor?*

And Nedzu *believes* it, damnit. That he’s a traitor. That he really—that he could have *possibly*—

Beside him, Kurogiri flickers. Wispy edges that could in an instant turn razor sharp, deadly. God, what has he *done*? These people could fucking *kill* him, and the only people in the whole world who could possibly help don’t even *know*—

“Shinsou?”

He sucks in a breath, too quick, too sharp, panic like a spike through his ribs, and Kurogiri’s *right there*, looking right at him, and he’s supposed to—what? Be a villain, play the part, convince them, somehow, *somehow*, that this fine, this is all perfectly fine, and—and—

Realistic, he thinks, gasps, grasping for a lifeline. Just be realistic.

He lets the breath rattle out of him. Lets his trembling hands drop to fists in his lap, and his eyes after them. Lets the shame sit, heavy, loud.

Kurogiri’s quiet. His head tilts, that indecipherable, sightless gaze a cold prickle down Hitoshi’s spine. Then, just as quickly, he waves a hand, casting a dark cloud over the table. When it dissipates, two small glasses remain, already full.

“Did you sleep well last night?” he asks, and nudges a glass closer.

“Yeah,” Hitoshi says. He takes the drink in hesitant hands. It’s different from the last. Darker, faint with cinnamon.

“And you’re comfortable? The clothes fit well?”

“Yeah,” he says again. Thinks it over and adds, “Thanks.”

“I understand this has been difficult for you.”

“No, it’s—good. I’m glad I got away from there.” He chances a glance at the screen. *Shinsou Hitoshi, UA Traitor*. God, how easy it must be to believe. “From them.”

“In that case—” Kurogiri lifts his glass and clinks them together. A toast. “To getting away.”

Hitoshi flickers a smile. “To getting away.”

Kurogiri knocks the drink back smoothly. Hitoshi copies, somewhat less smoothly, swallowing a cough and blinking back tears as it burns its way down. Better than the whiskey, but barely. He presses his knuckles to his lips, and tries not to tense when Kurogiri claps between his shoulders with what could almost be a breath of laughter.

“Come, the kitchen’s this way. Eat. Then I’ll show you around. You’ve been cramped up far too long already.”

The kitchen, as it turns out, is pretty much a free-for-all. There are more members here—another masked figure, though much more conservatively dressed than Mr. Compress, and a man with scars as dark as bruises like a patchwork across his skin. They’re as wary as the others were at his approach, but with Kurogiri at his side, the stares no longer sit so heavy.

Kurogiri takes him into the back and gives him free reign of the shelves. “Stocking up isn’t an issue,” he explains. “If there’s anything you’re wanting for, let us know. We can add it to the list for the next supply run.”

“Cool,” Hitoshi nods, and silently catalogues this information. Seems

he was right. They've definitely got people running deliveries. He wonders if they're part of the League too, or if they hire out to avoid the complications of notoriety. It would make sense. If the League of Villains were raiding the farmer's market every other week, people would start to notice.

"How'd you get all this stuff?" he asks around a mouthful of cheap ramen.

"We're much more than the media portrays us, Shinsou," Kurogiri's voice takes a wry edge. "We're not just a group of homicidal bandits. This is a safe haven for people like us. We work together to keep things running smoothly."

"Don't listen to him," a bright voice sings from the doorway. Hitoshi starts around.

It's a girl from the bar, eyes gleaming with brilliant grin. "He's just saying that so he can give you chores."

Kurogiri's bristles. "Maintaining a clean work environment is key to —"

"Yeah, yeah, heard it all before." The girl twirls past him and bends around Hitoshi, wrapping around his waist in an embrace so sudden he can hardly flinch. "Come on, poor little Hitoshi's been given rules to follow his whole life. He just got here! Let him have some fun."

She releases him, spins around to lean over the table in a maneuver simultaneously dazzling and terrifying. Hitoshi swallows his food, mouth dry.

"Hiya," she chirps. "Don't think we were properly introduced. I'm Toga."

"Shinsou Hitoshi," he offers weakly.

"I know who you are." She winks. "Fresh blood."

Kurogiri sighs. "Toga, please don't antagonize him."

"No, it's okay," he manages. "It's uh—very nice to meet you."

She gives a delighted laugh. "Oh, so polite. No *wonder* Kurogiri likes you."

Hitoshi blinks. "Uh."

“Well, just remember, *I’m* the fun one,” she says. “Come find me whenever you get bored of this guy. We’ll do something more exciting.” She winks again, and with a final twirl, skips out of the room, leaving a shock of silence.

Hitoshi and Kurogiri share a look. “Is she always—?”

“I’m afraid so,” Kurogiri says severely. “Don’t worry, she’s harmless. Well—mostly.”

“No, she seems nice,” he says. And chatty too, from the looks of it. He doesn’t know how high up the rungs she is, but if she knows anything of interest, he might be able to get it out of her. “Not what I was expecting. None of this is,” he adds, earnest. “I mean, the heroes and the news always make you guys look so—” He doesn’t have the words to finish—not without outright insulting them.

Kurogiri nods. “As I said, this is safe place for people like us. A family, for those who have been abandoned by their own.”

The thought is utterly surreal. A *family* of villains—societal rejects or those who rejected society. People like—well, him.

Wordless, he ducks his head, pretends to refocus on his food, and Kurogiri doesn’t press the issue.

“Finish up,” he says kindly. “Let’s see what else the world got wrong about us, shall we?”

He looks at the clock. It’s late. He should be asleep. But he can’t. Not yet.

He looks at the door. It’s closed. He should go. But he can’t.

Despite the hour, the place is bustling. The more he sees, the more Hitoshi gets the feeling that’s why they took so long to come get him from his room—his running schedule’s got him used to waking up before dawn, but this place seems to function on its own time.

The most striking feature is the careful balance the place strikes—it’s extremities and exterior seemingly abandoned, all while the core bustles with unseen activity. The apparent disrepair, he suspects, does its job of holding up the façade—an abandoned hotel isn’t likely to draw too many prying eyes. True to form, half the place seems to be falling apart, hall after hall of empty rooms, ransacked of furniture and undisturbed beneath years of dust. Yet, other places, like the bar

and the kitchen, are well-stocked and obviously well-tended to. This place won't be earning any five-star reviews, but it's clear the people living here look after it.

There's a gym on the first floor, inside of which the woman from earlier—Magne, he finally learns—is benching weights at an ungodly speed. She grunts in acknowledgment when they approach, and Kurogiri doesn't press, so Hitoshi supposes that's the best they're getting out of her. Past the gym and through what looks to have once been the reception lobby, there's a wing of boardrooms and offices, doors locked and blinds shuttered, which Kurogiri informs him, in no uncertain terms, are off limits. Other than that, it's—surprisingly normal. A laundry room. A library. A billiards room beside the bar, chairs overturned and curtains shredded.

"The games get rather intense," Kurogiri explains. "Ever played?"

Hitoshi pauses over the stack of cues, several of them stained with the rust of old blood. "Uh, never that competitive."

"Well, you're more than welcome to join the future matches. But whatever you do, don't let Twice con you into a game." He leans in, low and severe, but his glowing eyes crease in something like a smile. "His first personality lures you in, then his second milks you for all you're worth."

Hitoshi grins back. "Got it. Thanks for the warning."

They catch Spinner back out in the lobby, sword drawn and stalking towards the gym. He stops at their approach, fists clenched around the hilt. "What's all this? We showing the brat around already?"

"I don't believe you two have been formally introduced yet," Kurogiri says, neatly sidestepping the affront.

"Don't bother. Bastard's not worth my time."

Hitoshi frowns. That's an awful lot of confidence for someone who, as far as he can tell, isn't exactly hanging off the highest rungs of authority.

But Kurogiri only sighs. "It's only been a day. I'm sure Shinsou will prove himself yet."

Spinner rolls his eyes and mutters something about needing to go *practice his forms*. Hitoshi watches him go, sees the hunch in his

shoulders, the too-loud thump of his steps, and makes a mental pin. He wears the tough-guy act like an ill-fitting sweater—a novice with something to prove. Whether that makes him someone to exploit or avoid remains to be seen.

“Spinner can be—difficult,” Kurogiri says, voice low. “He has big ideas, but doesn’t always know the best way to get them across. Not without outright paraphrasing Stain.”

Makes sense, what with the way he’s dressed. Hitoshi looks up to say as much—and freezes. Kurogiri’s head is bent close, soft with that smile again, and it’s with a jolt he realizes, Toga wasn’t kidding. Kurogiri *likes* him.

Dazed, he doesn’t speak—just follows as Kurogiri leads on, back down to the basement and out through the loading bay doors. They open with a cold blast of air into a gated parking lot—wet with slush and banks of dirty snow, reflecting dim in the low lights from the surrounding windows. He squints, makes out a rundown car that seems to have been scrapped for parts, a pile of wooden pallets and plastic crates stacked to one side, but it’s too dark to see much else. Kurogiri produces a pack of cigarettes from somewhere within his intangible frame, offers one to Hitoshi and lights them both up.

They smoke in silence, the rush of nicotine warming his blood against the night. He listens for the sounds of the forest or the traffic beyond, but it’s a fruitless effort through the howl of the wind, and after a while, he gives up. Just lets himself breathe, for maybe the first time all day.

His eyes wander to Kurogiri. He doesn’t exactly lounge, but as he leans back against the wall, his edges grow wispier. Looser. Hitoshi’s eyes narrow where the tip of Kurogiri’s cigarette disappears into the veritable blackhole of his mouth, trying to catch a glimpse of teeth or tongue.

A low chuckle. “You can ask.”

“Sorry.” He drops his eyes, guilty. Then, “Um. How *does* it work?”

“I have a body. Regular. Not quite human, perhaps, but something like it.”

“Your quirk is teleportation, right?”

“Hm.”

“Then all the smoke is—?”

A shrug. “I suppose you could call it a mask.”

Hitoshi thinks, then, carefully, “Do you ever—take it off?”

Kurogiri pulls in a long drag, holds it and lets the words form. “A long time ago. Recently though, I suppose it’s easier to simply keep it on.”

Easier to play the part. To just keep pretending. “Because it’s what everyone expects.”

Kurogiri nods.

“I know what you mean,” he says. And then, a half-truth, a twinge of pain. “My whole life, ever since my quirk developed, it was like everyone just *expected* me to turn out—bad. Like they were always just waiting for it. And eventually, it just became easier to give them what they wanted. To wear the mask.”

He thinks of the press conference, Nedzu. *Until given proof otherwise, we are working under the assumption that Shinsou is innocent.* God, he wishes Aizawa had been there—even just for a glimpse. Aizawa *had* to know it was an act. Aizawa had seen beneath the mask. He *knew* Hitoshi could never betray them.

Didn’t he?

A long silence passes, the breath of Hitoshi’s admission rising up to dissipate like the smoke from his lips. God. How the hell is he going to get himself out of this one?

The night returns the silence, no stroke of luck or genius inspiration. That’s fine. He’s here now, and he’s not going anywhere. *I can be patient*, he’d promised. And he can. He’ll be careful, he’ll plan, wait for the right opportunity to strike, for the enemy to slip up first, like Aizawa taught. He’s alone, but then, he’s always been, in a way. He made it then, and he’ll make it now. He knows he will. He has to.

“You know, if you needed a smoke break earlier, you could have said.”

Hitoshi pulls back the cigarette—nearly down to the filter in his absentmindedness—and flicks off a bit of ash. “Sorry.” And then, with more honesty than he’s spoken yet, “It’s been a stressful day.”

Kurogiri chuckles. “What’s your usual? I’ll put it on the list for the next supply run.”

“Mevius. King size,” he says instinctively, lips twisted, bittersweet. “The ones in the red box.”

Kurogiri nods, and the smoke from his mouth curls up with a smile. “Consider it done.”

Hitoshi waits.

A day passes, then another, and he’s not dead, not strung up by his ankles pleading for his life. A day passes, then another, and he’s—maybe not fully trusted yet, maybe not fully welcomed, but he’s there. He’s there, and he waits, and he learns.

And he learns.

Toga can talk circles around him, but is nearly impossible to comprehend. She jumps from one subject to the next without pause or linear connection—one minute it’s a story about her childhood crush, the next it’s a story about a man she once slaughtered outside of a strip club. Possibly the same man? It’s difficult to follow much of anything out of her mouth. But for all that she’s a chatterbox, she seems equally keen on learning about him.

“Uh, well, I’ve never killed anyone,” he tells her, on the third day.

She wags a finger, undeterred. “Yet!”

And he learns.

Toga never graduated high school, but wears the uniform anyway because, verbatim, “It attracts the sickos.” He doesn’t know if Toga Himiko is her real name or something made up, but he does manage to get the school’s name out of her—Yamato Girl’s Academy—so that’s something. He also learns more about her quirk than any sane person would ever want to. Apparently, it requires her to ingest blood—disconcerting enough on its own, without the fact that her forcefully-dubbed nickname for him really does seem to be *fresh blood*.

“Any amount will do it,” she tells him. “But about a cup gives me a

full day.”

“That’s—” he says, and tries not to puke, “neat.”

And he learns.

Mr. Compress—*Just Compress, to my friends*—is about as polite as Kurogiri and as theatrical as Nedzu. He nearly doesn’t recognize him when, on the fourth day, he sees him without the mask—mid-to-late 30’s, grey at the temples and boasting a twisting moustache more befitting of a vaudeville character than a real human being. Like Toga, he’s a talker—a showman at heart, befitting of the few scraps of backstory Hitoshi manages to pry out him. Apparently, he was once an actor overseas. Still, Hitoshi remembers the rumours from 1-A that he was somehow both the key player and brains behind the scheme to kidnap Bakugou Katsuki, and knows better than to underestimate him.

Twice, unlike Compress, never takes off his mask, and—if the pitiful explanation Toga delivers is true—doesn’t seem to be able to. Hitoshi does manage to get a real name out of him though—Bubaigawara Jin. Or, at least, Bubaigawara Jin’s clone. That remains up for debate, apparently, except for when the man in question is actually in the room. When he is around, there’s hardly lack of conversation. He gives Toga a run for her money in the *so friendly it’s actually kind of creepy* department, with the added excitement of occasionally swapping personalities mid-sentence, so what starts out as a joke turns out to be a very serious, very detailed death threat.

Magne’s another recurring face, though he doesn’t so much see her as he *hear* her. A rough, booming voice that suits her hot-headed demeanor. She’s quick to pick a fight, but is a little more withheld when it comes to personal information. All things considered, Hitoshi pins her as someone to watch, if not to gain anything from, then at least to avoid when necessary.

The real loose canon is Spinner, who seems to have taken an inherent dislike of him, which Hitoshi quietly attributes to Kurogiri’s earlier explanation. Maybe he views Hitoshi as competition, maybe he just genuinely thinks him a useless addition to the team. Either way, he seems keen to avoid Hitoshi, and the few times they’re forced into the same space, outright ignores him. While apathy won’t get him far, but it’s miles better than hostility, so Hitoshi doesn’t press the issue.

Dabi’s a different story—a reserved, stoney-faced figure who can’t be more than a few years older than Hitoshi himself, yet somehow

shoulders a stature immeasurably more intimidating than anything Spinner's ever held. It's not just the scars either—something about the way he carries himself, cold and aloof. Hitoshi sees less of him than the others, and quickly gets the impression he's here less for the sense of community and more for genuine, wholehearted devotion to the cause.

Even so, he's got nothing on Shigaraki, who, even after several days of watching him from afar, is still the most terrifying sight ever made flesh. The few times Hitoshi spots him without the hand-mask atrocity, it's almost *worse*. Cracked lips and deep-set crimson eyes that seem frozen in a permanent scowl. The only positive aspect is how sparse he makes himself. In fact, three days in and Hitoshi's not even sure the man lives with the rest of them for how little he sees of him. When he *is* around, Hitoshi can always feel the shift in the air, the chill that sweeps in with him, the way his skin goes tight and the hairs on the back of his arms rigid. The way the others—Kurogiri especially—are just a little bit more careful, more attentive to the delicate balance of Shigaraki's temper.

All told, Hitoshi sees fifteen different people around the complex, but he's only got names for about half their faces. He doesn't know if it's because the rest of them aren't important enough to introduce him to, or too important to care. Either way, not all of them seem to live here. Giran, for one, seems to come and go as he pleases. Hitoshi catches him at the bar a few times, but mostly, he seems to linger in the offices and boardrooms. Besides him, people appear to be transported in and out by Kurogiri, but occasionally, nondescript cars will pull into the parking lot bearing unmarked deliveries of some sort. The second time, he manages to catch the plates, and sears the numbers into his brain until he can repeat them in his sleep.

He still doesn't know where they are, exactly, but the place is big. There are at least a dozen vacant rooms on his floor alone—shuttered and dusty with vents frozen over, maybe, but not entirely unlivable. Seems plenty enough for their currents ranks and then some. Unless, of course, they have other bases too.

He asks Kurogiri, on the fifth day, “Where did you guys find this place?”

“Shigaraki's master was very good to us. He procured a number of hideouts in the region, and our associates launder plenty enough funds to keep out prying eyes. We rotate between them, as required.”

“How many hideouts?” Hitoshi risks.

Kurogiri gives him a strange look. “Enough.”

Right. There goes that line of questioning.

So he waits. Listens. And later that night, as the hour creeps over to add another day to his victorious streak of *not yet murdered*, he tries again.

They’re in the billiards room, hazy under the sweet waft of incense, the hints of citrus in the ale lingering on his tongue, and Hitoshi’s stopped counting since his second glass. The current tournament Twice has corralled the others into shows no sign of slowing, and there’s a warmth that bolsters him, an easy laughter that bubbles over his lips at the increasingly explicit banter and increasingly drunken trick-shot mishaps, and—and he feels *good*.

“So,” he says. “All Might, right?”

Toga’s head snaps in his direction. Compress coughs into his drink. Spinner shoots the ball clean off the table. “You bastard, you did that on purpose.”

“No, no,” he slurs, confident in his performance of being more affected than he is. “Hear me out.”

Giran shoots Kurogiri a shrug and tips back his whiskey. “Yes, Shinsou?”

“So, he’s the end goal, right? All Might?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Okay, so, like, what happens after?”

“After?”

“After we kill him.”

A laugh from Toga. “Then we kill the next one, and the next one after that.”

Hitoshi waves a hand, grasps for the words “But, like—til how long?”

“Til however long it takes!” Spinner snaps. “Now would you shut up and let me focus?” He turns back to Twice and aims up another shot.

"That didn't count. I'm going again."

"How long it takes for what?" Hitoshi presses. He's rarely this talkative, and not half as brave. Maybe it really is the liquor.

"For there to stop being a Symbol of Peace," Kurogiri explains. "We're not so naïve to think this is an easy solution. Society is deeply entrenched in its poisonous hero mindset. It won't be easy to dig them out of it, but it will be worth it, in time."

Gets better with time, Hitoshi thinks foggily, and eyes Giran's whiskey.

"So," he says, eyes glued to the glass. "So, what's the plan? I mean—to kill All Might. The last one didn't work, right? So, so what now?"

Kurogiri and Giran trade another look. Giran gives a subtle shake of his head.

"A conversation for another time, perhaps," Kurogiri says, and Hitoshi's not too drunk to see the deflection for what it is. The bastard might like him, but he didn't get to be the League's second-in-command by being an idiot. "Come, let Spinner concentrate. He's only got so long before he loses his dignity."

"Watch it, asshole."

Clothes, food, smokes. Drinks and drinks and drinks. And a *home*, a safe place, for *people like us*. But he's still an outsider, fresh blood. Always distrusted, UA or League of Villains, always always always.

Hitoshi hums. With the alcohol numbing his thoughts, the sting of failure doesn't hurt so much. A test of patience, that's all. He'll get there. He knows he will.

Twice laughs, already counting the bills in hand. "Shinsou, you up for the next round?"

Hitoshi slings back his last sip and watches his vision swim. "Sorry, I've already been warned about you." He's not in that deep yet.

Infamous

Chapter Notes

SCHOOL IS A SCAM AND THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN THIS COUNTRY IS CORRUPT. ZERO STARS DO NOT RECOMMEND.

Seriously, folks, wow, my bad on the wait for this one. I couldn't even find the time to respond to the comments on the last chapter which sucks because I love talking to you guys. I only got my act together because I got a bunch of new readers in the past few days and I'm genuinely curious, where did you come from? Who hath recc'ed me? I NEED ANSWERS.

Anyway, I love you guys, blah blah, you know this, I'm going to go write a 20-page research paper so PLEASE SAY NICE THINGS because I'm gonna need a pick-me-up later.

Through the grace of some divine intervention that's been sorely lacking in Shouta's life as of late, the weekend passes without complication. Well. Further complication.

He's running circles in and out of Nedzu's office both days, between his regular night patrol shifts at the agency and the additional hours of watch over the destroyed UA gates. They keep eyes on the news cycles, trading insight whenever anything Shinsou-related pops up, which is an exercise in self-loathing itself, and watching online opinion polls slope ever downwards.

To say that the media was unkind to him would be an enormous disservice to the definition of the word. They tore the kid to shreds. His social media, his public records, his *address*—all of it, thrown to the wolves. Some tabloids even managed to dig up something about Mrs. Shinsou's divorce—threw together some trashy analytic piece about how having a deadbeat dad turned Shinsou into an inexorable, cold-blooded traitor. The kid's face is plastered everywhere he looks, and his mother's never far. Shouta can only imagine what she's going through. The paparazzi still haven't stopped camping outside her work. In the space of 48 hours, the Shinsou name has become synonymous with infamy.

Nedzu seemed nothing short of delighted every time he'd reported an increase in *anti-Shinsou sentiments*, which only spiked after his disastrous press conference. "The League needs every reason to think

we and everyone else believe Shinsou a traitor,” as he put it. “Our apparent doubt of him will only help them trust him more.”

He’s right, the furry bastard, but fuck, he doesn’t have to look so *smug* about it. He might be a damn good liar, but Shouta hasn’t worked for the man for a decade not to pick up on the way he silently savours every moment of a convoluted scheme gone right.

At the very least, Nedzu seems to be thinking long-term, and slips Shouta two burner phones on his way out of the office. “Secure. Untraceable. You’ll stay in touch with Mrs. Shinsou this way, and we won’t attract any eyes by being seen in too many meetings with the mother of a public enemy.”

It’s not much, and not half of what she deserved, but it’s something. A source of comfort, maybe, if she’ll accept it from him. Shouta hasn’t been brave enough to try yet, and the phone now sits heavy in his pocket, a weight that matches the heavy set of his shoulders, the drumbeat ache behind his eyes still refusing to be drowned out by even his fourth cup of coffee.

That’s how Monday finds him, leaning heavy on the 1-A podium, vision hazy on about three hours of sleep as the students trickle in. It doesn’t take more than a few of them to pick up on the tension in the air, the increasingly frequent weight of burden they’ve been living under since training camp. No stifled laughter, no trading phones to share nonsensical pictures and videos. A few whisper between themselves, and he doesn’t have to guess at what. They practically *live* on those chat forums. Whatever cursory Shinsou-bashing he saw in his brief search, he knows they’ll all have seen double.

“—not what I saw on Channel 54,” comes Mina’s voice, over the clatter of footsteps as more students pile into the room.

“Yeah, ‘cause they’re so impartial,” Kaminari snorts.

“Okay, don’t pretend like you don’t get all your news from Quirkblog.”

Scattered laughs—the first he’s heard of the day.

“Oh my god,” Kirishima says, “Do you guys remember that article they posted, like, back in September? Hang on, let me see if I can find it.”

“What, Top 10 Shittiest Quirks or something?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“Holy shit.” Kaminari’s all but jumping in his seat. “Wasn’t Shinsou literally on it?”

“Aha!” Kirishima holds up his phone in triumph. “I can’t believe they called it.”

“*Everyone* called it, idiot,” Bakugou drawls, slouched in disinterest at his own desk. “With a quirk like that.”

Aizawa’s chest goes tight. Like it’s so simple, so obvious. *I try not to use it*, Shinsou told him, months ago. *People don’t like it. Obviously.*

“A villain’s quirk.”

“That’s enough,” Shouta snaps, hands slammed against the podium loud enough to echo in the sudden hush. “All of you, get to your seats already.”

Mina leaps to command as though electrocuted. Kaminari straightens in his chair, eyes wide and lips pressed tight. They stare.

Shouta breathes, reining himself in piece by piece. They’re just kids. They don’t know what they’re talking about. Hell, they *can’t* know. That’s the whole point.

He forces his shoulders down, until the tension drips out, until he can say, in his usual, disinterested, drawl, “Class started a minute ago, slackers,” and watch a few small laughs break out.

He’s still got a job to do.

Freedom comes in increments.

Three days in, Hitoshi stops being called from his room for meals. What starts as his first terrifying blind trek through the halls becomes habit, a path memorized, and the stilted meal-time small-talk with the few League members willing to spare him the breath fall into pattern. Mostly, they seem content to let him be, though Hitoshi’s far from stupid enough to think he isn’t still being watched, and probably closer than he knows.

Once or twice, he spots a few dark figures slipping into boardrooms and talking in hushed voices—planning supply runs and fund management, from what little scraps of the conversations he manages to catch. But otherwise, there don't appear to be any pre-set meetings, at least not for the lower lackeys. The only time everyone reliably comes together is at night—billiards and darts and the occasional drunken sparring session, all fueled by rounds after round of drinking. Hitoshi takes care to appear to participate more than he is, to let his posture loosen and laugh amplify in the same degrees as the others, and at first, the open flow of booze sparks hope. He's seen more than enough movies to know the deeper the glass, the looser the lips. But to endless frustration, he still sticks out like a sore thumb in a room of seasoned drinkers, and no one ever seems to want to ruin the light-hearted atmosphere by indulging his questions on logistics and recruitment methods.

Still, it's—well, not easy, maybe. But not nearly as terrifying as he thought it would be. It's almost—*almost*—boring. He can't help but be reminded of old history homework, of the first-hand accounts of soldiers in battlefield trenches. How the days without action stretched into weeks, into months, of endless, mind-numbing inertia, only to be punctuated without warning by a single, heart-pounding scramble for survival.

On Wednesday, he decides to test his luck—steps outside for a smoke alone. The door clicks shut behind him and there's no blaring alarms, no Shigaraki Tomura rising from the depths of hell to smite him where he stands. The smoke from the cigarette curls in the air with the fog of his breath as he makes a meandering circle of the parking lot. No cars this time, so no license plates to memorize, but he brushes the snow off an old signpost along the face to reveal something else.

Welcome, it reads, in chipped paint and poorly-scrawled English, *to Mountainside Hotel!*

Well. Not exactly GPS coordinates. But he bets he could find them, given Google Maps and about a minute. Probably wouldn't take Nedzu a second. He takes a mental picture, adds it to the ever-increasing list readied for the first moment it has a chance of delivery. It feels a little silly. Not exactly safe codes or bomb sites, but, he reminds himself, it's something. Names and numbers, descriptions and quirks. A location now, too. Little pieces to add up, like a puzzle, eventually spelling out a picture of the League's every weakness. It's not much, but it's something.

It's something.

Before heading in, he checks the gate. Barbed wire buzzes with electric current, security cameras perched up on every corner. He presses as close as he dares, cranes his neck to see how far beyond the road goes, and its slopes out of sight into the woods. He turns back, eyes the camera, the building, silent behind him. He supposes he could keep testing his free rein, but then, it might be better not to know the exact moment the leash reaches the end of its slack. It might be better, for now, to live under the illusion.

He stubs out the cigarette and heads back inside.

On Friday, the bar smells like a wash of spiced rum and tobacco by noon.

Hitoshi's at a table with Compress and Twice, the two of them indulging his presence largely only for the grace of the increasingly erratic knife-throwing contest taking place between Spinner and Toga not five feet away. Spinner's losing—something of a recurring trend with him, apparently. His last throw hits hilt-first, deflecting wild, and the others let loose a stream of mockery in response, insults that start at Spinner's lack of coordination and end somewhere in the unsavory details of his mother's sex life.

Behind the raucous laughter, the door creaks open with a blast of cold air and an unfamiliar man, staggering under the weight of a tall stack of crates. Giran comes behind him, hands empty. "First two on the bar. The rest can go to the kitchens."

"Oh!" Twice claps his hands. "Did you get the Hennessy I asked for? Did you? 'Cause you forgot it last time. Did you get it?"

"Yeah, yeah." The new guy heaves the crates onto the counter, nearly tipping backwards with the effort. No one moves to help.

"Well, look who it is," Spinner saunters over, kicking the misfired knife under a table, and drawls, "Hatori the Coward."

"Haven't seen you since you fled Ibaraki with your tail between your legs," Compress muses.

“Yeah, like the fucking pussy he is,” Spinner laughs. “I’m surprised Giran even let you back in, with how badly you fucked up.”

The man flushes, but otherwise doesn’t react, and Spinner scowls. “What?” he goads, and leans in until his pointed teeth are inches away. “Nothing to say for yourself?”

“I’m lost,” Hitoshi whispers to Twice. “Who’s the new guy?”

“Huh, yeah, guess you wouldn’t know.” Twice scratches his head. “You ever hear about the shit that went down in Ibaraki Prefecture back in August?”

Hitoshi has vague memories of something on the news—the League of Villains versus a group of unlicensed vigilantes. Mostly, he remembers the Pros commandeering the story afterwards, twisting it to talk about the dangers of trying to be a hero without going through the official channels. He remembers thinking it was kind of tactless—the League had killed four people that day.

“We work with some guys out there, outsource to ‘em and shit. Well, they had some up-and-coming nobodies stepping on their toes, so we decided to put them in their place. But Hatori nearly fucked the whole thing up. Tripped like six alarms and nearly blew up the cargo we were moving. It was awesome.” Twice shakes his head. “Spinner loves to taunt him about it.”

Hitoshi frowns, then, carefully, “Aren’t you afraid of, like, alienating him?”

“Alien-what?”

“Making him angry? Making him—”

“What, betray us? Rat us out?” Twice laughs.

“He clearly handles, what? Some sort of drop-offs?” Hitoshi presses. “I mean, that’s sensitive information, right?”

Twice slaps his thigh, still heaving with laughter, leans over and knuckles Hitoshi’s hair almost affectionately. “Don’t stress it, man. Trust me, Hatori knows what’ll happen if he even so much as thinks of snitching.” From behind the mask, he winks.

Hitoshi’s stomach twists at the implication, and he quietly turns back. Coward or not, Hatori stands up to Spinner’s taunts stoically, a fact

which only seems to make him angrier. Spinner spits nearly the same jibes dealt to him only minutes ago, and when this fails to earn a reaction, presses his claws to Hatori's chest and *shoves*. The other man finally snaps, grabs Spinner's wrists and twists until they're locked in a grapple, faces inches apart. Twice and Compress start to their feet, but before the fight can go any further, a knife sails through the air with deadly precision, and Hatori leaps back just in time to avoid losing an eye.

"Aw, cute." Toga twirls a second knife, poised to throw again. "Now if only you'd had that fighting sprit back in Ibaraki."

"Piece of shit." Spinner straightens and shoves again, and this time, Hatori stumbles back, eyes low, cheeks flushed with anger. "Yeah, yeah," Spinner laughs, and hits him again. "That's more like it. Take it like the bitch you are."

Hitoshi eases back, heart still hammering from the adrenaline of the near-fight. He's on his feet too, though he doesn't even remember standing, but no one pays him any mind, circling Hatori like vultures. Fuck. Where's Kurogiri when you need him? What with his *safe haven* rhetoric. As it stands, Hitoshi can't imagine how this guy *wouldn't* hate the League after this. If this is really a place for outsiders, for societal rejects, how are they so blind to the danger of rejecting one of their own?

But not even Giran seems bothered by the antics, gaze unimpassioned as he counts the bottles and slides them into place beneath the bar. "That all of it?"

"Yeah, fuck," Hatori grouches. "Can I go now?"

Giran nods, and Hatori doesn't have to be told twice. He's out the door in seconds, a chorus of wolf whistles chasing him from sight.

"Fucking run, pussy," Spinner shouts. And then, to Toga, "I had him, you know."

"I'm sure you did," Toga laughs, and just like that, just like *nothing*, it goes back to normal. Spinner fishes his knife from under the table. Compress gets up to try his hand at the game. Twice skips to the bar to look for his Hennessy.

And Hitoshi's *stunned*, mouth working uselessly, eyes lingering on the door. No one goes after Hatori. No one cares.

His feet are moving before his brain's even caught up, a wordless, nameless sense dragging him forward inexorably. Down the hall and out the door, slipping through before it's even closed behind Hatori. His feet hit snow and he stalls, the parking lot empty and cold, the wind ragged. Hatori's ahead, steps hard, head low.

"Hey!" Hitshi calls. "Um, wait a second, uh—Hatori."

He starts around, surprise on his face immediately narrowing to distrust. "The fuck do you want?"

For a second, Hitoshi's breathless, words stuck and mind blank. Fuck. What *does* he want? "Um, you're new here, right?"

"What's it matter?" he snarls. "I know who you are. You ain't been here more than a fuckin' week. Don't think I won't—"

"No, no, I'm—I don't wanna fight. I just—"

Hatori's not listening, already spun around to leave again, and Hitoshi doesn't even know how to finish the sentence. *Hello, sir, can I interest you in betraying the country's most dangerous people and divulging to me all their secrets?* And—so what? So Hitoshi can sit on them for another next week, can continue to build his little puzzle of useless scraps, continue to play pretend at detective, wasting time while Mom and Aizawa and Nedzu get pummeled by the media on his behalf, without even knowing if they should really be defending him or not? Be patient, and be realistic, and earn their trust—and he *has*, he's done everything asked of him, but when does he get to use it, to do what he promised them he would, what this has all been for?

He opens his mouth, but Hatori's halfway gone, keys out and stomping towards the van stalled in the gate's entrance—open, for the first time Hitoshi's seen it. He looks at the open road beyond, at the promise of freedom—not for him, and everything he's still failed to learn, but maybe—

"Give it up, kid," Hatori says. "I'm out of here."

Yes, Hitoshi thinks, with sudden, *frightening* clarity. You are.

And the roads look lovely for a drive to UA.

The afternoon rolls around, second homeroom kicking off in much better spirits than the first. 1-A just out of English Lit, and whatever improbably fun lesson Hizashi was able to spin has done its magic of lifting the tension from the sets of their shoulders. It's a talent Shouta himself never bothered to learn. Someone's got to be the realist, he used to say, and he'd rather be an asshole and a good mentor than a friend and a bad one. Then again, he need only think of the reason for the UA's poor spirits in the first place to know that mindset hasn't exactly done him any favours lately, least of all concerning his role as a mentor.

Guilty conscience or not, he's got a job to do, which he tells himself, repeatedly, as he doles out a pop quiz, and turns a hard stare away from the answering groans of exasperation and cries of betrayal.

They're five minutes in, Shouta pacing the aisles to keep watch for cheaters—*Got my eye on you, Kaminari*—when the air splits with a crash, a piercing car horn and the screech of tires and steel.

Alarms blare.

Again.

Are you *fucking* kidding me.

"In your seats," he barks when, like the idiots they are, a few of them start towards the windows. "Get back, stay down."

His phone buzzes, and he snaps it to his ear. "What's going on?"

"Intrusion from the north gate," comes Kayama's voice, sharp, a little breathless.

He pries open the window frame. "Need back-up?"

"I—" A pause. "I don't know. It's just one guy?"

Other voices join the line. "Anyone see anything?"

"Nothing in the stadium."

"East gate's clear."

"Everyone remain with your students." Nedzu's voice. "Kayama, approach when safe."

“You guys,” she says. “Hang on, cut the alarms. I think it was just a drunk driver.”

But Shouta’s already got the window open, squinting against the wind. Across the lawn, sure enough, the gate is wrapped around a wreck of a van, hood buckled and spewing smoke. The driver’s door opens and a man sprawls across the concrete, then lumbers to his feet, dazed and slow.

“Kayama?”

“Yeah, hang on.” She approaches from the main plaza, slowly, phone aloft, then brings it back to her ear. “Shit. Facial rec’s bringing him up as a gang member.”

“Gang?”

“Yakuza,” she confirms, grim. “Known ties with the League.”

Shouta’s brain stalls out, a hundred threads with no answer tethered. This can’t be right. What’s a yakuza doing driving drunk in broad daylight, let alone straight into the one place he knows he’ll be caught and—

Questioned.

The thought’s no sooner than struck and Shouta’s out the window, tendrils of his weapon cast out to send him swinging. He hits the ground running, heart racing in a way that’s got nothing to do with the acrobatics. “I’m coming in back-up.” He can’t risk voicing it out loud with so many others on the line, but he prays the urgency in his voice is enough to communicate to Nedzu—if he hasn’t figured it out already. Something’s fucking off.

Because the man begins to stumble closer, and Shouta knows that slow gait, those glazed eyes. This isn’t an attack. This is a *message*.

“Aizawa, it’s just one guy,” Kayama says. “I got it.”

“No, no, don’t—”

Kayama activates her quirk, aromatic cloud rolling off her body in thick waves, nearly blocking the man from sight. Shouta swears, catches and snuffs her quirk out with his own not a second later, but it’s too late. The wind’s already caught the first cloud, scattering the perfumed fog over the man. Shouta’s heart drops as he skids to a stop,

hand up to cover his mouth, and watches helplessly as the man goes rigid, eyes rolling back, before he collapses.

Kayama whirls on him. “Aizawa, what the fuck?”

He shakes his head, holds up a hand while he regains himself, breathing shallow while the fog clears. The second it’s gone, he moves in, kneels over the man and rolls him onto his back. He’s well-dressed, if scruffy, face already beginning to bruise from the impact of the airbag. Most importantly, the fucker’s out *cold*, and whatever state he’d been in before has surely been erased, message deleted before it could ever even be delivered. The thought robs whatever meager hope had been building straight out of his chest.

There’s a light kick at his side, prompting him to stand. “You wanna tell me what that was all about?” Kayama demands.

“Sorry, I just—” Shouta sighs, and finally tears his gaze back up. “I thought I recognized him.”

He’s an idiot. He’s an idiot and he’s going to die.

Hitoshi sits on the crates by the back door, knees tucked close, and smokes and smokes and smokes, until the embers singe his fingertips and the scent of tobacco burns at the backs of his eyes. The nicotine courses through his veins, unsteady in his erratic pulse, but does nothing to calm him as the chill settles into his bones, numbing everything but his mind, spiraling and spiraling and *holy shit* did he really just do that? Did he *really just do that*? And think it would *work*?

What if the guy doesn’t make it to UA? He hasn’t got a fucking clue how far outside the city they are, let alone how long that drive would take. Hell, what if he wakes up halfway there and decides to turn right around? What if he wakes up in a ditch? What if he *hits someone*? He’s pretty sure the *impaired fine motor control* he and Aizawa worked so long to figure out the parameters of didn’t leave much room for navigating traffic. *Fuck*. Fucking fuck fuck fuck. He probably just caused a traffic accident. He probably just *killed* someone.

And even if—even *if*—it does work, what if the League thinks the whole thing smells off? Hitoshi was clearly the last one to talk to him.

It wouldn't take long to piece that puzzle together, to know who was really to blame for the defection. He remembers Twice's words. *Hatori knows what will happen if he even thinks of snitching.* Hitoshi doesn't know. And *really* doesn't want to find out.

He squeezes his eyes shut, cards numb fingers through his hair and tugs, hard enough to hurt, to pull the doubts right out of his head. Sitting out here isn't doing him any favours. Fuck. It's probably getting more suspicious by the second. Fuck fuck. No, he needs to get his act together. He needs to move. He needs to play this off, or this whole charade will be over before it even begins.

He forces himself up, steels himself and manages his way back inside to the bar. It's exactly the same as he left it—dim lights and loud voices. Twice has his long-awaited Hennessy, already open and passing out shots. Masked by the clamour, Hitoshi slips back onto his stool at the table. The tremors, he thinks, he can at least blame on the cold.

"You know you don't have to go outside to smoke, right?"

"Huh?" He nearly flinches out of his skin. "What?"

"You can smoke in here," Compress says, and gestures around. "Kurogiri doesn't like to, but everyone else does."

"Oh." He scratches his neck. Forces the hand still. "Sorry. It's, uh—habit."

"Right." Compress frowns, gaze lingering, and Hitoshi's heart stutters under the scrutiny. Before anything can come of it, footsteps pound down the stairs and Shigaraki flies through the doorway like a tempest, eyes crystalized with rage, and Kurogiri hot on his heels.

"What the fuck is going on?" Shigaraki's eyes sweeps the room, paralyzing Hitoshi in the tide of anxiety that swells up under his skin, but the gaze skips over him, flits erratically between the others.

"What is it?" Compress asks. "What's happened?"

"Hang on. You should all see for yourselves." Kurogiri solemnly fetches the remote from behind the bar, and everyone turns their eyes to the TV.

"—just getting word of another attack. Yes, folks, you heard right. UA High School is apparently under attack for the second time in as many

weeks,” an anchor says hurriedly, face pinched in concentration, and Hitoshi’s pulse spikes like a rocket. No fucking way. Hatori made it? “We go live to the scene now.”

The shot changes to that of a blurry camera phone, shows a panicked crowd and a van smashing through the front gates of UA, then cuts to that of an overheard helicopter, showing the wreckage from the other side. “I’m here now at the north entrance of UA campus, where moments ago a van was seen crashing into the gates at full speed,” a woman’s voice declares. “The lone driver was subdued by Pro Hero Midnight with minimal injuries. We’re awaiting comment from the school now.”

Hitoshi stares, face a mask. *Shit*, he didn’t even think about that. The crash definitely would have snapped him out of it—that, or whatever Midnight did. *Tell the Pros everything you know about the League of Villains*, hadn’t exactly been specific, but he’d hoped that Hatori would have at least managed to get *something* useful out before he snapped out of it. But from the looks of things, he never even spoke a word.

“That’s not one of ours, is it?” someone asks.

“Holy shit. Is that the delivery van?”

“Who authorized this, huh?” Shigaraki demands.

“Tomura,” Kurogiri soothes. “Please, there must be an explanation.”

“Wait!” Toga shouts, and squints at the recap of a blurry figure stumbling out of the wreckage. “Is that Hatori?”

Spinner’s eyes fly wide, then narrow. “I knew he was a worthless fucking coward.”

Toga shakes her head. “This doesn’t make sense. He was *just* here.”

“Yeah.” Twice stands, the eyes behind his mask slowly widening in revelation. “And you were—You were making fun of him!” He points an accusatory finger at Spinner, who freezes as all eyes fall to him. “You did this!”

“What? How the hell is this *my* fault? I didn’t do shit.”

“You made fun of him. You alien—ali—you made him turn on us!” Twice grabs his head and wails. “I knew this would happen!”

“I didn’t *make* him drive to UA and turn on us.”

“Nobody made him do anything,” Kurogiri cuts in, and Hitoshi stares hard at the floor. Sweat pools at the base of his throat, cold with adrenaline at the stomach-churning certainty that any moment now they’ll realize, they’ll slot the pieces together. But Kurogiri just continues, sharp and brusque. “Pointing blame is useless. We need to stay calm and assess the damage.”

“We need,” Compress says, “to get the hell out of here. If Hatori’s ratted us out, this place is going to be the first thing he tells them about.”

Shigaraki’s face twists in a snarl. His hands slam down on the bar, and the wood splintering and crumbling to dust beneath them. “Get us to the Saitama base, right fucking now,” he growls to Kurogiri, voice a glacial river, like ice threatening to reveal the roaring waters beneath. “Anyone not through in ten minutes gets left behind.”

Kurogiri swears—the first Hitoshi’s heard from him—but whatever second-in-command training he’s had kicks into high gear. He turns to the others. “Twice, send your doubles to gather the others,” he commands. “Tell Dabi to cut loose—we can’t leave anything behind. Compress, shrink down whatever you can, starting with the safes in Giran’s office. The rest of you, gather your things.” At last, he begins to circle the room, opening small portals over crates and cabinets to vanish them away. “We won’t be back.”

Spinner snarls and surges to his feet, Compress following, jaw clenched, prompt under the grim command. Even Toga’s silent, slinking after them, face etched with concern, almost—*fear*.

That’s when it clicks.

They’re really—They’re *really* doing this. Abandoning their base. Just like that. They’re *that* panicked.

And they don’t suspect a thing.

His lip curls.

The euphoria lasts exactly a second before he remembers he’s not out of the crossfire. Across the room, only Shigaraki remains, his rage like a building storm, watching the world at his hands crumble.

“Shinsou, gather your things,” Kurogiri says, and Shigaraki’s head

shoots up, catches him, still seated. His eyes narrow. His head tilts. A shiver of danger ripples across his skin, a static charge, like the feeling before lightning strikes. Hitoshi jerks to his feet and the spells breaks, but Shigaraki's eyes linger a second more, until finally, he steps back and eyes the ruins.

"Ten minutes," he repeats. "Then we burn this place to the ground."

Something, Someone

Chapter Notes

This chapter is actually two chapters that got squished together. Hopefully the length makes up somewhat for the wait. This chapter is also one I've been very eager to get to - it contains some of the very first scenes I envisioned when creating the concept for this fic. Took us a while, but hey, we got there!

In other news, I thought it was the one-year anniversary of this fic being posted but, uh, apparently that was a month ago. Whoops! To readers old and new, thanks for sticking around!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The rush of the relocation sweeps him along headfirst, the chaos so overwhelming that, in the midst of it, Hitoshi nearly forgets he has no actual reason to be panicking.

It's bizarrely reminiscent of UA, with the League somehow managing to look exactly like school kids racing to finish a procrastinated assignment. Shigaraki wasn't kidding when he said ten minutes. It's hardly half that time before a portal drops Hitoshi and a handful of others in a dark, drafty room—over twice the size of anything he saw in the hotel. The others hit the ground and scatter, and it's all Hitoshi can do not to spin in circles trying to get a hold of it all. Thick concrete pillars hold up a rusted tin roof, lined with fluorescent lights, tangles of exposed piping along walls of sheet metal and tinted glass. A warehouse?

“Don't go far,” one of Twice's doubles tells him, and dumps armfuls of Compress' marbleized baggage on the floor.

“Wait, where are we?”

“Don't worry,” says another, already halfway back through the portal. “We're safe here.”

“Can I help?” he tries.

“You can help by getting out of the way,” Spinner says, spilling through the portal and heaving a duffle bag to the floor. “Move this shit upstairs.”

There's nothing to do but comply, the others seemingly too focused to pay him any mind. He's only got one bag of his own, haphazardly stuffed with the clothes and toiletries he'd kept in his room, but he shoulders it alongside Spinner's bag—packed with more swords than a single person could ever reasonably need, by the god-awful weight of it—and lumbers his way up a creaking metal staircase. The landing opens up to a walkway which wraps around the walls of the warehouse, overlooking what he can now tell is some sort of factory floor. Across the way is a room with glass walls—some kind of observation deck, furnished with a few dusty-looking sofas and chairs.

He sheds his burden there, pauses to catch his breath and watches the scene below. It's hard to say what this place might once have been used for, now dimly-lit and stacked high with shelves, piles of scrap metal, and vats of strangely luminescent liquid. There's what looks like an old conveyor belt running down the middle of the floor, dividing the room in two, and a crosswalk above it that cuts it in the other direction. There's definitely more to the building—doors lining the far wall below and a hall that stretches out behind him and even a third floor he can't presently spot the access too, but he doesn't get a chance to investigate much further, as the others begin to make their way up the stairs toward him.

The panic seems to have ebbed away, and on its heels is a sort of resigned exhaustion he's never seen in them before. Magne and Spinner stand tense and surly, arms crossed and guarded. Compress rubs a tired hand across his eyes. Twice and Toga lean on each other like they've just run a mile. Before long, the door opens again, heralding Giran and Shigaraki.

Kurogiri and Dabi are last to arrive, the portal closing behind them around a billow of smoke. Blue flame ripples between Dabi's fingers, extinguished with a wave as he flicks ash from his sleeves, and Hitoshi knows, beyond a doubt, Mountainside Hotel is no more.

He doesn't know whether to be elated or horrified. On the one hand, the League just destroyed their own base. Whether or not they had to time to bring everything with them, that *has* to hurt. If not a blow to morale, it's at least got to disrupt the flow of business. And it was by *Hitoshi's* hand that it happened. He took a risk, and it paid off. Maybe not completely—Hatori didn't seem to get much use, after all. But, hey, that's still one more villain off the streets, and at least dozen more forced deeper into hiding.

On the other hand, Hitoshi can't forget he's *part* of that dozen. All the

information he managed to gather on their main hideout is worthless now. Worse, he's got to do it all again, with the threat of everyone being on even higher guard than before.

"Well, I'm happy to see everyone made it," Kurogiri says dispassionately. "We've covered our tracks as best as we can for now."

"Word's been sent out to all our contacts that we've been compromised," Giran announces. "But we still need to be careful."

Kurogiri nods. "That means no leaving the base unless authorized by myself or Shigaraki. We'll also have to set up a perimeter watch until we can guarantee we haven't attracted any unwanted attention."

"So this is where we're staying?" Toga asks.

"We might move to the Osaka base if business picks up there, but we should lay low for a while."

She groans and throws herself backwards across the sofa, kicking up a cloud from the dusty cushions. "This place suuucks. The bathrooms here are so gross."

"Shut it," Spinner snaps. "We've got bigger things to worry about."

"I agree," Giran says. "Hatori was one of our mob contacts. Quirkless, and a bit dense, but he never struck me as a threat."

"Anyone as *spineless* as him is always a threat," Shigaraki growls, and Hitoshi's not the only one who flinches at the fury in the tone. "Worthless fucking scum. I should have slit his throat after Ibaraki."

"Tomura—" Kurogiri tries.

"No, no, you're all just like him." His eyes skitter across the room. "All a bunch of fucking cowards, a bunch of fakes, just following in the footsteps of *Stain*, never truly believing anything for yourselves—"

"Tomura, calm *down*," Kurogiri commands. "There's no sense blaming anyone here."

"Eh, he's got a point," Giran says, and shrugs off Kurogiri's pointed stare. "Recruitment spiked after *Stain's* manifesto went viral. If memory serves, Hatori was one of those recruits. But it's dropped off since." He taps his chin. "People related to *Stain's* message, and joined us because they thought we did too."

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that’s exactly our problem.” He fixes them with a long stare. “The League doesn’t *have* a message.”

Shigaraki’s finger twitch, as though ready to snap his head clean off, but it’s Twice who breaks the tension. “Aw, fuck, he’s right,” he sighs and hangs his head. “It’s the same reason I joined. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad I did it, but it wasn’t until *after* being here that I really ever got a sense what the League was even about.”

“Me too,” Toga admits. She eyes Dabi, who shrugs, then Spinner, who rolls his eyes. Nonetheless, the message is clear.

“Exactly.” Giran turns his focus solely to Shigaraki. “You want recruits who really believe in your message? Then you need to get that message out.” He walks, steps slow, purposeful, but it’s not Shigaraki he approaches. “You need to advertise.”

His hands fall around Hitoshi’s shoulder like a clamp. He goes rigid under the touch, the hot breath down the back of his neck. His pulse jumps and the hands tighten, like if he pressed just right, Giran could squish that pulse like a bug beneath thumb.

“And how exactly are we supposed to do that?” Dabi drawls, and Hitoshi can practically *feel* the slick smile that slides over Giran’s face in response.

Shigaraki is silent, eyes narrowed and assessing, like he already knows where this is going. Hitoshi, cold with dread, gets the feeling he does too.

“Shinsou,” Kurogiri says, breathing the revelation to light. “We use Shinsou.”

“Exactly,” Giran purrs. “We need a spokesperson, someone to draw in the crowds. Who better to use than the one face everyone’s already talking about?”

“Hopeful UA student turned League of Villains poster child,” Compress says slowly, wondrously. “It’s practically a coming-of-age tale.”

“It’s perfect,” Kurogiri says.

“No,” comes Shigaraki’s voice. His face twists into a scowl, a pout. “Kurogiri, no, *no*,” he all but whines, and if Hitoshi weren’t so gutted

by the relief of the protest, he'd be morbidly fascinated by the sudden display of immaturity. "We're not using him. Why the fuck would we use him? He's nothing, he's nobody."

"Think about it, Tomura," Kurogiri says calmly. "This could work."

"But why does it have to be *him*?"

"Cause he's got the infamy," Giran says. "And these days, that's gold."

Shigaraki breathes ragged, shoulders tight and defensive. His fingers flex, and an itch races across Hitoshi's skin at the sight, the promise of danger. No one moves.

"Tomura," Kurogiri says. "It's a good idea. Your master would want you to take advantage of this opportunity, wouldn't he?"

Teeth bared, bloodshot eyes snap to Hitoshi, to Kurogiri, and back again. Another second, then, at last, a hiss. "Fine."

"Then it's settled," Giran says, and a murmur of acknowledgement breathes across the room like a sigh. It hits Hitoshi like an icy chill, ramrod straight where he's still pinned in place. Toga winks, Compress grins, and Hitoshi can barely breathe. If infamy is gold, he's all but won the lottery. And the League has come to collect.

"Shinsou? What do you say?" The edges of Kurogiri's face turn up in that strange, harrowing smile—eager and deadly.

Hitoshi stares over the sea of their faces, vision nearly blurring with the weight of it. What does he say? What *does* he say? What does any of this even *mean*? The League promoting themselves in any capacity is bound to be terrible, but they want *him* to do it?

And if whatever they're planning works? It could do irreversible damage. But if it could get him into their good graces, if it could get their guards down, if it could keep him here, long enough to get what he needs, long enough to reverse the damage, to contain it? Could it be worth it?

Whatever the plan, whatever they want from him, and whether they truly think they're giving him a choice or not—

He doesn't have one. He has to do it.

It's what he signed up for. To join the League of the Villains, to

support them, for the whole world to see. Anything, he'd promised Giran. He would do anything.

So Hitoshi seals his fate. "I'll do it."

Campus calms later than usual that evening, the tension of the day's strange events still lingering long after the bell's rang. By sundown, the chatter of students walking home from after-school clubs finally fades, the cries and shouts of the supplementary training in the stadium growing to distant echoes. A quiet breeze drifts through the streets, and instead of following it home to drown out the much-anticipated weekend in his liquor cabinet, Shouta slips around to the back gates, and waits.

After a few minutes, a silent figure approaches, hunched, masked under a scarf and hood. Shouta keys in the access code to open the gates, and sweeps his eyes down the street behind her. No reporters, but given how they've been tailing her like bloodhounds all week, he has no doubt they'll get here sooner or later. He double checks the gate's locks behind him.

The walk to Nedzu's office is silent but for their heavy steps. Shouta isn't nearly stupid enough to try for small talk, but when he turns to open the door for her, he somehow can't help but feel the sting of guilt when she shoulders past without so much as meeting his eye. The blinds of Nedzu's office are shuttered against the faint rays of the setting sun, painting the interior in the harsh pallor of fluorescents.

She rounds straight for Nedzu. "It was him."

Nedzu's behind the desk, Toshinori across from him in the only occupied chair. He gestures for Mrs. Shinsou to take the second, but she stands instead with arms crossed. Belatedly, Shouta plants himself beside her.

"He was trying to tell us something," she says.

"Almost undoubtedly," Nedzu says. He and Shouta have already been over this, briefly, before this afternoon's press release. Hatori Daichi—as they've come to identify him—has been in custody since waking up from Midnight's quirk.

“He was brainwashed all right,” Toshinori says, mouth set in a grim line. “My friend at the PD said the guy had no idea where he was when he woke. Claimed he didn’t even remember the drive over.”

“So this a good thing, right?” Mrs. Shinsou says. “Hitoshi’s trying to get in contact with us.”

“He is,” Nedzu agrees. “But unfortunately, Mister Hatori has apparently been uncooperative since waking. Whatever information Shinsou believed he had worth telling us, we’ve lost our chance to obtain.”

“That’s not necessarily true,” Toshinori says. “The police might be able to get something out of him.”

Nedzu laces his paws together. “Something useful for *them*, perhaps. But the police don’t know about the traitor. They won’t even know to ask.” He shakes his head, delivers the verdict like a blow. “We don’t know how much Shinsou risked to send this man our way, and we squandered our chance to learn anything valuable from him.”

“It’s my fault,” Shouta says, triggering a start like the other three had forgotten he was even there. He holds stoic under the sudden attention, despite the roiling pit in his stomach. Nedzu’s right. It’s been hanging in the back of his mind all day

“I should have realized what was happening. I should have reacted faster.” Then, to Mrs. Shinsou alone, “Your son took a huge risk for us. I promise not to let the next one go to waste.” The words taste bitter, and are hardly half of what she deserves. There shouldn’t have to *be* a next one. There wouldn’t be, if he’s been faster. If he’d been stricter, from the beginning. If he’d actually been able to help Shinsou, like he promised.

Mrs. Shinsou breathes hard, and for a long moment, doesn’t speak. There’s something brittle behind her eyes, like flaking paint over a wall on the verge of collapse. The silence stretches far too long before she finally wrenches herself away. “He won’t use the same tactic twice,” she says quietly. “And he won’t take another risk until it’s safe again.”

“My thoughts as well,” Nedzu says. “Any future attempt to communicate will have to be subtler.”

The unspoken thought hangs in the air. Assuming he didn’t get caught for this one.

He didn't, Shouta tells himself firmly. He's a smart kid. Reckless, maybe, but clever. It was a good plan. It could have worked. It should have.

"We'll get the next one. We won't let him down," he says, and hates how empty the promise tastes.

Hitoshi wakes the next morning with a singular, near-painful knot of certainty that whatever hope he'd had of getting out of the League's plans has already been utterly crushed. The warehouse feels so much emptier than the hotel did, spaces wider in a way that seems to welcome watchful eyes, steps echoing down every hall. In the morning chill, there's a strange buzz of energy about the place, an itch beneath his skin.

When Toga comes to collect him, her razor-point grin is doubly wide, and Hitoshi knows what she's going to say before the words have even formed. "Time for your close-up." She winks. "Giran wants to see you upstairs."

In the end, there's no contract to sign, no debate, no room to ask questions or for clarification. There's a blank-walled backdrop and a too-bright light, a camera aimed like a loaded gun at his eyes, and a circle of villains with weighted stares like a jury set to judge him guilty.

"You don't have to look like you're on trial," Kurogiri says, voice oddly light in the otherwise dark atmosphere. He gestures to the set-up. "We've come up with an idea."

They're in a small, dim room off one of the warehouse's corridors—what looks like it could have once housed office cubicles. Hitoshi sits in the middle, cold with sweat under the single light, Kurogiri before him. The camera across the room whirs and clicks as Compress frowns over it. Beside him, Giran watches, but offers no assistance. And furthest away, hunched with his legs tucked beneath him in a chair, is Shigaraki, scowling like he could decay Hitoshi by sight alone.

The light flickers, like a horror movie. Like they're about to fucking *torture* him.

Compress clicks his tongue. “Somebody fix that thing before it ruins the shot.”

“As you can see,” Kurogiri explains, “We’ve decided on a means of ‘spreading our message’ as Giran suggested.”

Hitoshi eyes the camera. “Like, an ad?”

“Something to that effect. You said it yourself, the media has never painted us in an accurate light. This way, we can get our message out to would-be recruits without it being corrupted by their bias.”

It’s benign enough, on the surface. But Hitoshi knows how these things work. “Won’t it just get taken down?” he asks. “I mean, if we post it online, it’ll get flagged. That’s what happened with Stain’s video.” He never actually managed to watch it himself—and not for lack of trying. It always disappeared minutes after being posted. Either that, or riddled anyone unlucky enough to catch it full of viruses.

“This isn’t going to be like *Stain’s* video.” The name drips off Shigaraki’s tongue with disdain. “This is going to be bigger, much bigger. Better. They’ll *have* to talk about it.”

“The media hasn’t shut up about you since you *turned*. There’s no way they’ll pass up the opportunity to dissect every frame. Besides, we’re going to make this an *actual* story—something that demands reporting,” Compress says, and finally steps back from the camera. He produces a folded paper from his pocket and tosses it to Hitoshi.

It’s a flyer of some sort. Hitoshi unfolds it to reveal a glossy spread, a park on a warm summer’s day, children playing and couples strolling arm-in-arm across a pristine lawn. In the center is a fountain, a golden-rimmed monument, atop of which sits an enormous statue of All Might, fists clenched and raised to the heavens.

“This was proposed by Musutafu’s city council after the incident with Bakugou Katsuki. Construction finished last week, all tax-funded, of course,” Compress drawls. “Pure idolism—nothing more. A monument to corruption.”

“So, we’re—going to vandalize it?” he asks hopefully.

“Please, have a little more showmanship,” Compress laughs. “We’re going to *incinerate* it. We’re going to remind them that no matter how high they raise their false idols, without a strong base, anything can be torn down.”

“Our philosophies and methods may be similar to Stain’s, but Tomura’s right, we don’t just want to repeat his words.” Kurogiri picks the flyer from Hitoshi’s hands and replaces it with another—a sheet of neatly printed script. “We’ve prepared a few things for you. Take a look.”

He casts a quick look about the page, lands on, *official renouncement of the so-called Symbol of Peace, the very seed of the corruption which rots the foundation of our society*, and feels he gets the gist. It’s some sort of rallying cry, a call to arms of all those exiled by quirk standardization and social rankings. The exact kind of shit that would have appealed to him not too long ago.

He swallows against the knot of nausea in his throat. “You want me to say all this?”

“Well, yes. But first, we’d actually like you to try something a bit more—personal.” Kurogiri nods, and Compress hits a button on the camera. A tiny red dot illuminates. Recording. “You’re a household name, after all. Your notoriety alone will draw in plenty of curious viewers.”

“Wait,” Hitoshi says. “I don’t—What do you want me to say?”

“Something from the heart, kid. People wanna hear you, not just our script.” Giran says. “They wanna know why you did it.”

Did it. Joined the League.

Sweat pools at the base of his throat. His pulse goes oddly quiet. They want to know why. Why did he do it? He stares at the camera, the inky black lens, the blink blink blink of red, like it might divulge him the answers. Why *did* he do it?

“I joined the League because. Because I didn’t know what else to do,” he admits haltingly, each word pried out of him like a flesh torn from the bone. “Because no one was listening. No one would listen to me, and I—all I ever wanted was. To prove myself. But they told me I couldn’t. And I didn’t know what else to do.”

There’s a long silence. His gaze flickers to the others, uncertain.

“So that was awful,” Giran says plainly.

“I told you,” Shigaraki snaps. “I fucking told you he shouldn’t do it. This is fucking stupid, why would anyone even care about one fucking UA student?”

“Former UA student,” Kurogiri corrects softly, head tilted. He turns to the others. “Might we have a moment alone?”

Giran raises an eyebrow. He and Compress trade a look, and Compress shrugs. With a gentle nudge, he prompts Shigaraki to his feet, who glares as though Kurogiri’s done him a personal offense. The three of them slip out the door, with Giran offering one final, “Five minutes,” before it clicks shut behind them.

In the silence, the thunder of Hitoshi’s pulse rings like a drum, stomach coiled tight with embarrassment.

“Shinsou,” Kurogiri says, forcing his gaze up to meet a flickering frown. He doesn’t do anything else. Just stands there, watching, the little red dot still blinking behind him. And—

Five minutes.

Giran said they had five minutes. Alone with Kurogiri, Hitoshi could— He could *leave*. With a few words, he could force Kurogiri to make a portal straight home, and no one could stop him. No one would even know until they came back. Five minutes to get away, to get help. Five minutes and this could all be over.

Kurogiri crouches in front of him. “Are you alright?”

And Hitoshi’s throat closes up around the breath that would set him free. He nods, haltingly.

“Camera shy?” he asks, and there’s no judgment in the tone. “Me too. I usually prefer to let Shigaraki take the reigns. I think he’s rather jealous we’ve given you the spotlight and not him.”

“He can have it,” Hitoshi whispers.

Kurogiri shakes his head. “Tomura is clever and very capable, but he does his best work on the battlefield. His personality doesn’t exactly instill a great sense of morale.”

“And mine *does*?”

“Yes,” Kurogiri says, like it’s that simple. Like he means it. “You took an incredible risk, publicly, irrevocably, to join us. With the whole world watching, you stood up for what you believed in. You’ve been very brave, Shinsou.”

Fuck. What he wouldn't have done to hear something like that from Nedzu. From Aizawa.

"I'm sorry to ask so much of you, truly," Kurogiri continues. "We wouldn't be making you do this if we didn't genuinely think it could work."

It could. It *would*. That's the problem.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Just—keep trying. That's all we ask." Kurogiri dips his head, offers a lopsided kind of smile, and there's something uncharacteristically soft about it. "Now, do you remember what we talked about the other day? How everyone always expected you to turn, and how, over time, it became easier to do just that?"

Easier to play the part, to wear the mask.

"I'd like you to do it like that." Kurogiri stands, and takes the script from his hands, now wrinkled and smudged with his sweat. "Don't worry about this. Right now, I just want to hear from you. About why you felt the need to wear that mask. Because I don't think you're the only one who does."

He moves back behind the camera, the ever-blinking light, and nearly fades into the shadows. All that's left are the glowing eyes, almost familiar now in their warmth.

Hitoshi swallows thickly, indecision warring in the quiet. He thinks, suddenly, of Nedzu's advice, from months ago. To compartmentalize, to use the pain he genuinely felt, to weave his lies from half-truths. That's all it is, he tells himself.

He lies.

Watching himself back on camera is utterly surreal. Dark clothes and eyes of ice, shadows dripping down his face like the contempt that drips from his voice. He looks terrifying. He looks like something out of a movie.

He looks like a villain.

“The so-called heroes never cared about me,” the Hitoshi on the screen spits. “They could never be bothered with someone like me. I was a hopeless case—bad, *evil*, through and through. They decided that for me, the day my quirk developed. Nothing else mattered. *I* didn’t matter. I was nothing to them.” The words pierce with venom, a flash of teeth in the slow, sick smile that splits his face. “*Now*, they’re listening. Now, they care. Now, I’m something, I’m someone. And all it took was a little push to get their attention.”

“Fantastic,” Compress’s voice snaps the illusion, and the image pauses, cold eyes and a frozen smile. “And here’s where we’ll cut.”

There’s a clap of glee from Toga. Magne’s hand hits his back in a congratulatory pat. Even Dabi looks impressed. The whole League have gathered to watch the first cut of his performance, and to Hitoshi’s sickening horror, they couldn’t look more pleased.

“Excellent job, Shinsou,” Kurogiri says.

“Meh,” Spinner drawls. “It’ll do.”

“We’ll wait until dark to warp to the park,” Compress says. “Might not be as dramatic as an attack in broad daylight, but we’ll get cleaner shots.”

Kurogiri hums and inspects his pocket watch. “We’ll head out soon. No one go too far.”

The others take cue. An amicable chatter picks up around the room as they relax back into their seats, looking instantly more comfortable than he’s seen any of them so far in this place. Hitoshi doesn’t move for almost a full minute, gauging, but the distraction of a new mission seems to have pulled their focus away. Spinner’s rehearsing his stance, swiping his blade in wide arcs through the air, the others calling out direction and advice from between laughs, and Hitoshi’s vision spins, weightless with the sudden lack of scrutiny.

He thinks he’s going to puke.

He’s breaks for the door, fingers fumbling through his pockets to close around his saving grace—a half-empty carton of smokes. The hallway twists and breaks out onto the walkway, metal that echoes and clangs with every step. The warehouse floor is empty and dark, lights flickering on belatedly in reaction to his movement, casting a cold wash over the shelves and faintly glowing vats along the far wall. He should—fuck, he should investigate, should use this opportunity to

look around, to *do* something, but he's starting to feel like if he doesn't get a hit of nicotine between his lips in the next ten seconds he might actually die on the spot.

He jumps out the door to the nearest loading platform and gasps for air like a man drowned. The parking lot glows under a half-melted frost, all broken concrete and chainlink fence. A few flickering streetlights outline a single point of entry—a dirt road through what looks like an industrial scrap yard. Hitoshi presses up against the brick and sucks down enough air that the smog starts to make him feel sick, then lights up, swearing on the exhale.

Another few drags and his shoulders finally begin to relax, heart settling down from its war drum rhythm. He stars at the red glow of the cigarette, a little deliriously. Fuck. Is he getting addicted?

He's stressed about a hundred percent of the time, small wonder. Mom would probably say something about building up a psychosomatic reliance. Then again, it's a small price to pay for a convenient excuse to step out and get some space, some time alone to think about what he's doing.

Which, by the way. *What* the fuck is he doing?

The video is *good*. Dangerously good. And that, coupled with the stunt their about to pull, is anything but. There's nothing he can do about it now—they've got the footage, his part is already solidified. Whatever they end up posting for their little recruitment ad is going to be seen by the whole world, his face etched to the front of it. *God*. An advertisement for the League of Villains. What was he *thinking*?

There's got to be something he can do to mitigate the damage, even just a little. He's got the information—names, numbers, quirks. He's right in the lion's den. He's literally sitting on a jackpot, if he could just *do* something with it.

Focus. Think. His last attempt to get a message to Aizawa failed spectacularly, so he's got to scratch that idea right off the board. And he can't take another risk like that until any lingering suspicion dies down.

But maybe he doesn't have to take a risk. Maybe he can do something simpler, something easier to slip past the radar. They said they were taking him with them to the statue, didn't they? Maybe instead of trying to *deliver* a message, he could just... leave one behind? He shakes his head. They'd surely notice if he left a damn *laundry list* of

their secrets lying around for someone to find. No, it would have to be something small, something *tiny*, something no one would even think to look for.

The heat at his fingertips announces his time's up, cigarette burned down to a stub. He extinguishes it under his heel absentmindedly, still trying to chase down the thought, and reaches for another. The carton's nearly empty, he notes distractedly. He'll have to ask Kurogiri for some more.

His fingers close around cigarette and freeze, eyes wide with the realization of what he's already holding.

Something so small, so obvious, no one would look at twice.

No one but Aizawa.

The statue is every bit as grand as the image proposed. At a first glance, Hitoshi's almost impressed.

That is until Dabi's cold fire rips like lighting across its face, scaring black the brilliant smile that dazzled the world, lulled it to obedience and blinded it from its own terrible truths. The base decays under Shigaraki's touch, and comes down in a deafening crash. The fire spreads in the brittle dry grass, illuminating the night in an electric heat that sears the backs of Hitoshi's eyelids, blankets the snow in a furious glow and sears the exposed earth beneath. Shouts and jeers rise to meet the statue's fall. In the distance, sirens.

All Might's golden head rolls to a stop, half-melted, deformed like a rotted fruit, and Hitoshi stands above it, unaffected, bathed in the light of the fire and the gleam of the camera that captures it all. The detail, he thinks, is really quite striking. He plants a foot atop the eyes to cover the familiar stare, and tries not to imagine the real thing.

And when it's done, the message delivered and the shots captured, and the howling laughter drowned out by the thunder raging in his head, Hitoshi steps back into the portal, empty-handed, his lifeline half-buried in snow and scorched earth.

Shit. He could really go for a smoke.

Chapter End Notes

Boy oh boy, what on earth does our Hitoshi have planned???

The Poster Child

Chapter Notes

Howdy, friends! Kicking off the new year with a new chapter aaaand that [playlist](#) I finally got around to making. It's mostly lyrically/thematically related, with some instrumental atmospheric inspiration thrown in. A few of the songs relate more to Part 3 than 1 or 2, so bear that in mind if you're super anxious about possible spoilers? Nothing's spelled out too obviously though ;)

I'll likely be editing/adding to it as we go along, so if you've any suggestions, send 'em my way. Otherwise, give it a listen if you fancy!

Thanks for sticking with me through another year!

Shouta sees the video 36 minutes after its initial upload. It has over 50,000 views, a number that doubles by the end of the hour. It gets taken down, reposted, taken down again, and by the time the 7AM news cycle hits, he watches with a numb horror as floods nearly every channel and outlet, each frame frozen and zoomed in, highlighted and analyzed in hushed tones by wild-eyed morning talkshow hosts and stern-faced anchors. Shinsou's name is splashed across every headline, *again*, for the second time in as many weeks, and Shouta can't tell if he wants to puke or punch something.

It's kind of like watching a horror movie come to life. It shoots him right back into his fifteen-year-old body, curled up on the sofa next to Hizashi on summer break, working their way through old horror classics, the two of them dead tired and refusing to admit it, knowing they won't get a wink of sleep that night as that dark-haired demon girl seemed to come crawling out the TV and straight for them. Except this horrifying figure stays two-dimensional and a world away, unreachable, unreadable. This figure looks straight at the camera, familiar eyes dark with unfamiliar depth, and spits his disdain for hero society with enough venom Shouta feels it like the sting of claws against his skin. It's good. It's believable. The lessons paid off—Shinsou lies well enough Shouta almost can't tell.

It makes him *furious*.

"What the hell is this?" he demands of Nedzu, the second they're

behind the privacy of his office door.

Nedzu sighs. He looks ruffled, in more sense than one—patches of fur sticking up in all directions, like he's been awake for hours. Shouta can't help a surge of vindictive satisfaction that even Nedzu's superior intelligence apparently doesn't know what to make of this mess.

"Scripted," he says finally. "I've watched it a dozen times. There's no code, no hidden message."

Shouta knows. He's done the exact same thing. "Not all of it," he counters anyway, and takes a seat across him. "Some of it's been chopped out in the edit, but the two-minute mark onwards sounds like him. Sounds like— like things he's admitted to me before." Somehow, the admission feels like a betrayal of trust, another tally in the long list of ways he's proved Shinsou's insecurities right. But if anyone's going to spot what he missed, it's Nedzu. "Watch it again."

They do, and then again after that, for nearly half an hour, to no result. No blinking Morse code, no double-entendres, not so much as glance off camera to show where the others are standing in the room. Shinsou sounds exactly like himself. Angry, and hurt, and firm in his resolve to avenge that anger and hurt. But still himself.

It's with regret that Shouta eventually has to tear himself away. But even as he walks to his office and throws himself down at his desk, the image hangs heavy behind his eyes. If there's really nothing more to it, really nothing to be uncovered, why did Shinsou *do* it? Was he threatened into it or did he agree on his own? Best case scenario, it's just a clever maneuver to gain their trust. But *fuck*, was it *worth* it? To act like — like goddamn *poster child* for the League of Villains?

Homeroom's in less than ten minutes, and it's with dread he imagines the snippets of the rumour mill he's bound to catch from the students. He'll have to do a better job at maintaining composure than he did last time. Hell, at this point, Shinsou's actions are utterly indefensible, no two ways about it. It would be foolish for him to do anything but let 1-A tear him to shreds, especially after— this.

God. What is this?

A creak at the door draws his gaze. "Shouta," Toshinori says, peers in to make sure the room's empty and closes the door softly behind him. "How are you?"

The question is so simple, delivered with such *earnesty*, the air goes

out of him like a deflated balloon. "Fine."

Toshinori sits without invitation, stares him down across the desk, mouth a thin line. "What does Nedzu think?"

"Jury's still out."

"And his mother? How's she fairing?"

Shouta thinks of the anchors. *Shinsou Hitoshi's mother was reached out to, but has declined to comment.* He thinks his own pathetic attempt to reach out. He texted Haru this morning. *Have you seen it?*

Yes, came the immediate reply. *Is he trying to tell us anything?*

We're still reviewing. I'll keep you posted. And then, after consideration, *Are you okay?*

She hasn't responded since.

Toshinori seems to take the silence for an answer. "He saved me, you know."

"What?"

"Shinsou Hitoshi saved my life. That's the only reason he's doing this. Because he got stuck there, with the League, after stepping in to protect me. Don't forget that."

Shouta really doesn't need the lecture. "I know."

"Do you?" Toshinori says. "You look miserable, Shouta. You look defeated."

"You saw the video, didn't you?" he snaps. And then, fury renewed by the memory. "He stood on your *decapitated head*. How am I *supposed* to look after that?"

"Like you still trust him," Toshinori says, unmoved. "Don't let this—whatever this is—change your mind. Don't let this make you doubt him."

"I won't," Shouta says, but the poison behind the words is gone, sapped as his anger ebbs away. "I trust him. Of course I trust him." And he does, down to the bone. Maybe not at first—after their fight, after the attack—but Toshinori's right. Hitoshi saved his life. But more than any of that, he's a good kid. Always has been. "I'm just worried,"

he says at last. “Not about him. For him.”

Toshinori’s brow creases, lips tight, something that could be empathy but looks dangerously close to pity, to fear. Shouta doesn’t know if it’s better or worse than that damn smile. Real, maybe, but no more comforting. Then again, he thinks, remembering the way that famous smile had warped, distorted by the fire and Shinsou’s indifferent glare over, it, that smile wasn’t really doing them any favours anyway.

That afternoon, Shouta’s able to pawn second homeroom off on Toshinori, and with Nedzu’s approval, slips on his goggles and weapon and slings himself across town.

Shihori Park is a new addition to the city, nestled in the few acres of greenery remaining in an overcrowded, middle-class neighbourhood. Gated to protect unsuspecting children from the surrounding traffic, the park boasts a koi pond on one end and a cherry orchard on the other, and, in the center, holds the desecrated, still-smouldering ruin of a 600-million yen monument to the city’s greatest hero.

Flashing lights and police cordons block the path, but Shouta swings in low, brandishing his Pro badge like a shield, and elbows his way through the crowd.

It’s even worse up close—All Might’s decapitated head face-down in the snow where it seems to have been kicked around like a ball. An officer turns it over to snap a picture, and it’s hardly recognizable as a face at all. What remains of the statue and the plaque that once stood at its base is spray-painted black, littered with threats and slurs and vague anti-hero sentiments—claims of corruption, of greed and inequality. Things he’d expect from the more political ilk, someone like Stain rather than the League. It’s both surprising and not—you can’t run a campaign ad without slogans, after all. None of the writing looks like Shinsou’s, but Shouta studies it carefully anyway.

He makes a slow round, then another, still not quite sure what he’s expecting to find. He doesn’t let himself think the best, doesn’t let himself think the worst, doesn’t really let himself think at all. He just looks, tries to imagine Shinsou, to trace his steps. Here’s where he stood, where he posed, that split-second shot where he laughed.

He shakes the image, makes another round. The other officers are starting to look at him a little funny now, Pro badge or not, so he moves back toward the cordon, further from view. The eyes begin to turn away, and Shouta breathes a sigh of relief.

Huh.

He steps back again, past the cordon and then beyond, until no one's watching anymore. That's right, nothing to see here. The monument's much more interesting—ground zero, the scene of the crime, the place everyone would think to look.

Everyone would have been looking at it then, too.

He turns. The park is empty behind him. Slowly, carefully, he forces his eyes to linger on each detail—the boring, the bland. The still waters of the koi pond, the way the frost clings to the naked branches of the trees. Closer still, yet more uninteresting. The park bench with gum stuck to its underside. The rusted trash bin and the nearby litter that missed it. An empty carton of smokes, soggy from the snow.

Red box. Mevius. King size.

In a second, it's in his hands, heart leaping to his throat. He doesn't dare hope, but— but *of course* Shinsou didn't leave a clue in the video, in plain sight and under intense scrutiny.

He left it where no one was looking.

Shouta flips open the box. Inside, along the rim and slanted hastily down the side, is a list of names and what look like license plates in a tight, messy scrawl. At the bottom of the carton are two wads of paper, cigarettes that have been unrolled and emptied, and covered front to back in even more ink.

He snaps it closed just as quickly. Breathes, and then checks again, just to be sure he didn't hallucinate the whole damn thing. His fingers tingle, chest tight.

As though cradling an injured bird, he slips the box into a loose pocket, careful not to crumple it and smudge the ink. Glancing around to make sure he hasn't caught any more unwanted attention, he takes out his phone—the burner.

He's got a whole list that needs to be run through the database, profiles that need to be drawn up, plates that need to be tracked.

Finally, something he can actually *do* , and the warmth of purpose surges up through him like a tide.

But first, he's got a promise to keep.

His fingers dial the memorized number, and it rings only once before she picks up. Despite everything, Shouta can't keep the smile from creeping into his voice.

"Your kid's a genius."

The change in headquarters, despite the initial blow to morale, turns out to have done little to curb the League's drinking enthusiasm.

Hitoshi never expected his first high school party to take place in a dingy, semi-abandoned warehouse, nor, more urgently, in the company of the League of Villains. But seated among them in the warehouse's upper viewing deck, warmed from the stomach outward, music blaring from tinny speakers while he watches the wall-deemed-makeshift-darts-board sustain increasingly drunken target attempts, he can't help but laugh, just a little, at the absurdity of it all.

"What're you grinning about?" Spinner demands, the heat of the words diluted by a slur. He's just finished sloppily showing Toga some kind of evasive maneuver, which involved one too many backflips for Hitoshi to follow. *Made it up myself*, he'd boasted, only for her to flawlessly repeat it on her first try.

"Your ass-ugly face, probably," Magne says. "Fuck, Spin, cut the kid a break for two seconds, would you?"

Spinner rolls his eyes, but for once doesn't seem inclined to fight. There's a sense of good humour—a genuine camaraderie. They are celebrating, after all. He twirls his sword and gives another display. "You think you could do better?"

"Fuck no," Hitoshi replies honestly. "I'd fall straight on my ass."

Toga laughs. "Is UA so useless they never even taught you to fight?"

He thinks of his training with Aizawa—his desperation for any scrap of attention and advice, how even before they ever started, he'd

always watched him, tried to copy his posture and form. His elation, that first time. *All right, go change already.*

“Never,” he says, and drowns the bittersweet stab by downing his glass.

“You should let us teach you!” she says. “Aw, Toshi, that would be so fun.”

“You think?”

Magne scratches her chin. “Not a bad idea.”

“Yeah,” Dabi drawls. “Twice’s doubles make great punching bags.”

“Hey!”

“I’ll teach him.” Spinner saunters over, chest puffed like a preening bird. It would almost be threatening if Hitoshi didn’t know better. “Come on, kid, one-on-one. Show me what you got.”

“For god’s sake, no one’s fighting anyone,” Kurogiri says, hands splayed in a placating motion. “We’re supposed to be celebrating.”

And so they do, drinking to Spinner’s increasingly erratic attempts to one-up Toga, to the evening news still reeling with the fallout of their video—a million views and climbing. Nedzu and Aizawa fail to make appearances, though some rather brazen reporters do manage to get a few blurry seconds of his mom leaving the apartment, eyes low and steps quick as they chase her down the lot.

The alcohol blunts the ache of the image she cuts, the sudden spike of shame and doubt. There’s no way yet to know if it was worth it—if his gift for Aizawa was found. If in the end, it will even make any difference at all, shaking hands with the devil if only to mislead him.

At the very least, he thinks blearily, he wasn’t murdered on the spot. If nothing else comes of it, he’s still here. He can try again, the path ahead all the clearer for the trust he’s fostered in the job well-done, in earning the League’s open—if drunken—affection. He can try again, and again after that.

For now, though, he’s still got his part to play, and that certainly doesn’t involve sulking by himself in the corner, so he pours another drink, paints on a smile, and lets himself get swept up in the victory.

Not So Different

Chapter Notes

Shinsou: *develops a smoking addiction*

the comments: had it not been for the laws of this land I would have slaughtered you

Shinsou: *uses smoking addiction to deliver a secret message*

the comments: you're doing AMAZING sweetie

On a serious note, this chapter references the human experimentation and child abuse tags rather liberally. Neither actually take place on-screen, but both are discussed in detail. Please be mindful, friends.

It's busy for a Sunday afternoon. Busy enough that the crowded downtown streets present something of a challenge to Shouta's current goal, and the tall perches of roof-tops and unoccupied balcony ledges something of a comfort. He finds two railings sturdy enough to tie up a sort of makeshift hammock, sets up shop with eyes on the target across the street, and waits.

The target in question: a tourist-trap burger joint nestled between two office buildings, prices cheap enough and take-out fast enough to make it a local favourite for busy whitecollars on their lunch breaks. Or, in this case, busy detectives.

The second he'd hung up the phone with Haru yesterday, he'd taken off for Nedzu's. Together with Toshinori, they'd poured over Shinsou's list, scoured the UA villain database and expanded on any League files they could. Nothing pointing them in the direction of the traitor yet, but they've got names where they previously had only aliases, quirk diagnoses where before it was just guess-work. It's progress, it's *something*, but there's only so much it can help the three of them alone.

But the Musutafu Police Department has numbers, resources, and most importantly, a database that combined those of all local agencies into one convenient repository. If any of Shinsou's information was going to yield hard results, they would find them there.

Shouta has worked with Detective Tsukauchi before. Not enough to call him a friend, but enough to know he's good at his job, if a little

nozy. He spots him easily enough - a familiar trenchcoat-clad figure that rounds the block and into the burger joint with steps just a little *too* eager.

Shouta lets him get his food first, takes his time to unwind and stow his weapon, and leaps to the other side of street, poised to drop.

“Those carbs will kill you one day.”

If Tsukauchi startles at the invasion of personal space, he recovers smoothly enough. “Thanks, Eraser. A true hero, keeping the streets safe and the detectives healthy.”

Shouta shrugs. “It’s your waistline, not mine.”

Tsukauchi pointedly sticks a fry in his mouth. “You just here to roast me, or you got business?”

“You got somewhere to be?”

“Not for another thirty.”

“Feel like heading back to the office early?”

Tsukauchi’s brow quirks, the unsaid need for privacy clearly heard. “Sure,” he says, and thoughtfully chews another fry. “Why not?”

In Tsukauchi’s office, Shouta lays out the facts. Doesn’t unravel the soggy cardboard of Shinsou’s list, but might as well have for all that he recites it word-for-word, down to the dates on the license plates.

When he’s done, Tsukauchi looks a little winded, a pen poised over a notepad with not a single word written.

“I already ran the names through UA’s villain database, but I’m hoping yours is more comprehensive.” He gestures to the computer between them, repeats, “Jin Bubaigawara. You know how to spell that?”

“I’m sorry,” Tsukauchi says. “Run me through how you got all this information again?”

“An anonymous tip,” Shouta says, straight-faced.

“Right. And that tip was...?”

“Anonymous.”

“Uh-huh. But you know them personally?”

Shouta glares. “Detective.”

He raises his hands in defense. “Hey, I’m just doing my job.”

“Then run the damn names.”

“I will,” he promises. “But hell, this is a lot, Eraser. If we’re going to go all in on this, I need to know you can trust this source.”

“You wanna use quirk on me? See if I’m lying?”

Tsukauchi makes a face. “Don’t be an ass. You know I trust you.”

“And I trust this source.”

Tsukauchi gives him a long look, then at last, sighs his concession. “Okay, let’s do this.”

“Jin Bubaigawara.” Then, because he’s not quite done being an ass, “You sure you can spell that?”

The pull up old files—League and yakuza profiles long organized under suspicion and inference, at last given hard, concrete detail, swinging wide the door for further investigation. With traceable names at last, they get backgrounds, addresses, family histories. The license plates, too, turn up a few hits, though many are either unregistered or stolen. The big money, though, is the single location. A place by the name of *Mountainside Hotel*.

They find a match easy enough, an old rundown resort hotel some 50 kilometers outside the city. Looks to have been abandoned after the latest recession, at least five or six years ago. The kind of place that wouldn’t turn a single eye, and it gets Shouta’s heart racing, already prepping a mental catalogue of heroes suited for infiltration and containment, readying a plan of attack.

The dream's cut short before it can even take root, Tsukauchi zooming in the satellite imagery for a better look and finding—there isn't one. The place is *gone*.

They're there within the hour, a forensics team carefully sifting through the rubble and burnt-out husk of what was once, seemingly only hours ago, the League of Villains' main hideout. A few beams and walls still stand, charred black with gaping holes stark throughout, roof collapsed inwards where it wasn't entirely incinerated. Broken glass litteres the snow, twinkling beneath a layer of ash.

Tsukauchi whistles and slaps his back. "If only that tip had been a little quicker."

Shouta bites his tongue—if only *he* had been quicker. And to think, Shinsou had been *right* here, the *League* had been right here, for who knows how long, and no one had ever noticed? He could fucking slap himself. "What about the rest of it?"

"The rest of what?"

"The intel. You put out a notice for any of those plates yet?"

Tsukauchi grins, hard-eyed and focused. "You got somewhere to be?"

Shouta shakes his head.

"Then let's get busy."

The League of Villains Gets Political?

The tagline scrolls across the screen, bold letters hooked like lures for curious viewers, highlighting the plastic smiles of the two anchors. The story—one of many still milking the League's video—runs on the 6 o'clock, 8 o'clock, and midnight cycle.

"The League of Villains' latest public stunt turned many heads, and not for the reason you might think," says the host, a suited woman with exaggerated expressions. "Musutafu law enforcement responded to sightings of members of the League in Shihori Park on Monday night and early Saturday morning—including leader Shigaraki Tomura and recent UA traitor Shinsou Hitoshi—who were reported to have been

vandalizing and destroying the city's most recent monument to former Number One Hero, All Might. In a video released by the League in the aftermath of the event, their reasons for doing so were explained. Take a look."

Blue-hot fire and the touch of decay, a shot of the League standing together against the dark sky, then Hitoshi, alone under a single light. "Nothing worth doing has ever been easy. True change has never been easy. But we fight for that change, we fight for the abandoned, for the anonymous, for the people brave enough to lift their heads from the sand of this shallow, bigoted, classist society," says the Hitoshi on-screen, words he's heard repeated enough times he could probably recite them in his sleep.

The anchor takes the screen again. "Although the video initially sparked widescale outrage and criticism, some online forums have begun defending the statue's destruction, along with that which it represented, and are even lauding the League for their political stance against corruption, social inequality, and quirk-discrimination." The anchor turns to her co-host, whose brow furrows in something that's probably supposed to look handsomely thoughtful. "Mishima, what do you think?"

Hitoshi's stomach twists from where he's watching, tucked into the least disgusting corner of an old sofa in what must have once been the warehouse's breakroom. He mutes the screen, but can't help but linger over the screenshots of chat rooms and discussion boards, echoes of those same sentiments—some anonymous, others proudly declared. Sure, some of them are probably just playing devil's advocate, but for every troll defending the League, there's someone who *means* it. Hell, in another life, *he* might have meant it.

Still, he has to remember, there's some good in this. Has to *keep* remembering, lest he fall paralyzed by his fear of exacerbating things.

So he does the only thing he can. He watches. And he listens. And he learns.

He learns the League is still getting settled in their new space, still, according to Kurogiri, "waiting to see if another re-location would suit them." Apparently they've got smaller hideouts across the city, places they rent out to share with their yakuza ties, and a few more emergency bunkers outside of the city, but none as well-stocked as their current, or, more to the point, which see as much business.

Because this place sees *business*. In a complete 180 from their relative isolation at the hotel, Hitoshi wakes up on the third morning and is stunned to find a flurry of movement on the factory floor. With a little pestering of Toga, he discovers the warehouse was once a satellite base, never meant for permanent housing, but rather pickups and drop-offs. Since All Might's pre-emptive retirement over the summer, business has spiked, marking the warehouse as a veritable hotspot.

The sudden existence of new tenants doesn't seem to be preventing business as usual. Over the next few days, Shinsou sees more new faces than he did in the nearly two weeks he spent in the hotel. On the plus side, there are more open spaces and fewer locked doors. On the other hand, there's about double the people at any given time of the day, which gives pause to any plans to sneak around.

He remembers Shigaraki referring to this place as their "Saitama" base during the move. Saitama like the prefecture, he has to imagine, which has a particular knot of nerves settling this stomach. He wonders—and tries not to—how far from home they are, how far from mom. More than that though, it's dangerously, brazenly close to UA. The fact that it even exists at all, in plain sight, nestled away in the city's industrial yards, and hasn't been discovered yet, is insane. It even seems to be running as a legitimate business—or part of one, anyway. For every tinted-windowed van carrying crates of firearms and suspicious powdered substances, there's two more carrying scrap metal and woodchips.

"Like I said," Kurogiri explains, after subtle inquiry. "We've plenty of ways to accumulate funds *and* divert suspicion. We're not just villains, we're businessmen."

"Ugh, yeah, that's why this place is no *fun*," Toga bemoans. "Everyone's always *working*."

"What would you rather be doing?" Hitoshi prompts.

She rolls over from her spot languishing on the floor, her eyes finding his.

"Oh dear," Compress says. "I know that look."

"Hitoooooshi," she sings, and springs to her feet. "Do you wanna do something fun? Do you wanna play?"

"...Play?"

“She means fight.”

Hitoshi’s stomach drops, mouth falling open to protest, but Toga’s quicker. “Come on, come on, pleeease. It’ll be *fun*.”

He pauses, considering. He’s here to gather intel, after all. If Toga’s willing to show him her tricks, he’d be a fool not to take it. And really, he’s *almost* positive she wouldn’t actually hurt him.

Besides, he thinks, and flexes his fingers, it’s been a while.

“I’ll go easy on you, I promise.”

“Actually,” he says. “I think I’d rather you didn’t.”

Fun, as it turns out, is not necessarily the word Hitoshi would use to describe training with Toga.

They clear out a corner of the main floor, leaving a few crates and shelves nearby to liven up the terrain. They stand face-to-face, about five feet apart, Hitoshi tensed, Toga with her head tilted, considering. Dabi and Compress watch with mild interest from one of the crosswalks above.

“Don’t break anything,” Compress calls.

“And don’t kill him either,” Dabi adds, perhaps a little too earnestly.

Toga unsheathes a knife, twirls it thoughtfully, watches the way Hitoshi’s eyes flicker. “You trust me, don’t you?”

He forces a smile. “Not a chance.”

“Hm, smart,” she says, and launches forward in an attack.

He doesn’t stand a chance—it’s two swipes, wide arcs he just barely manages to dodge, and she drops, sweeps out her legs in a kick that sends him sprawling.

“Aw,” she coos, and gingerly places the heel of her boot on his chest. “Cute.”

The heel presses down, just for a second, forcing the air out of his chest. Then, just as fast, it lets up. She thrusts out a hand and pulls him to his feet.

Winded, Hitoshi can only stare, terror and awe swirling together in his chest.

“Again?” she asks.

His voice bubbles out in a laugh. “Again.”

Getting his ass kicked is very informative.

He always knew Aizawa was holding back in training—he never would have stood a chance, otherwise—but it isn’t until the third day in a row of Toga grinding his face into the cement that he truly appreciates how *much* Aizawa must have been restraining himself.

Aizawa never aimed to hurt. Where Toga’s blows come in a relentless flurry, Aizawa always gave him room to fall, time to compose himself and pointers afterwards. Praise, when he deserved it. Critique, on the more frequent occasions when he didn’t.

Toga holds nothing back, makes every bite of the blade and drop of venom from her mouth *sting*.

“No wonder they wouldn’t let you in the Hero Course. You’re so pathetic, they must have known you wouldn’t stand a chance,” she taunts, and Hitoshi sees red—sees the ceiling, then the floor, as she flips him over with ease.

It might not be the teaching style he’s used to, but Hitoshi still learns a surprising amount. Learns that the defensive forms and evasive maneuvers Aizawa taught him don’t count for shit when his mind blanks out to the white static of adrenaline, when there’s a knife pressed to his throat and an arm twisted behind his back and a body curved over his, breathing laughter in his ear as it pins him to the floor.

It’s in this exact position that Kurogiri finds them, glowing eyes wide in his face. The smoke at the edges of his body seems to spike

outward. “Toga,” he says slowly.

“Kurogiri,” she says nonchalantly, and eases up off Hitoshi’s ribs.

He coughs as fresh air floods his lungs, turns his head and spits blood.

“What’s... going on here?”

“Practice,” she answers smoothly, like the sight of her seated atop Hitoshi’s back is nothing out of the ordinary.

“Right,” he says. “Shinsou?”

“All good,” he wheezes, and offers a thumbs up.

“Right,” Kurogiri repeats, like he’s still not convinced. He clears his throat. “Shinsou, could I have a word with you?”

Toga frowns but dismounts at last. She hefts him to his feet like a wet kitten. “He consented to this, I swear.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” he says distractedly, and beckons Hitoshi closer. “That’s actually not why I’m here.”

Hitoshi frowns. “What’s going on?”

“We’ve got some potential business partners visiting,” he says, voice low. “We think we might use your... *help* with the negotiations.”

This gets his full attention, like a jolt of electricity. Hitoshi follows as Kurogiri leads him up the stairs, ignoring the groans of protest from his battered limbs. The halls of the third floor are carpeted, narrow—voices less likely to echo. It’s here that Kurogiri pauses, and there’s something uncharacteristically somber about his eyes that makes Hitoshi tense, the cold drip of anxiety settling in like a chill around his bones.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes, yes,” he nods, but seems to struggle to follow it up. “We’ve ordered a shipment of... valuable weapons from our contacts with the Eight Precepts.”

“Eight Precepts?”

“The yakuza,” Kurogiri explains. “It’s just... Shigaraki’s been a little—on edge, since his master’s defeat. He doesn’t trust the supplier.” He

sighs. “He wants to confirm the capabilities of the weapons before we purchase them.”

“Okay,” Hitoshi says slowly, still not sure of his part in this.

“We need you to force a demonstration,” he says at last. “Of the weapon.”

“Is the weapon a *person*?”

“In a way,” Kurogiri says, which inspires exactly no confidence at all. “You’ll see. Just— do as you’re asked and you’ll be fine.”

Hitoshi opens his mouth, closes it. “Okay. I mean, whatever you need.”

Another pause. Kurogiri heaves a sigh and straightens out his shirt and tie. He eyes the bloodied mess of Hitoshi’s nose and lips, a little helplessly, and Hitoshi smears the worst of it away on the back of his hand, earning a flicker of a smile.

The room Kurogiri leads him to is brightly lit, but a dark shadow seems to hang in the air, a palpable tension that bends and dips and swallows him entirely as his feet pass the threshold. An arrangement of plush chairs fills the center, not a single one occupied, with two briefcases resting on a table, around which the room’s occupants stand.

To one side is Shigaraki, shoulders high and fingers half-curved. Giran’s beside him, looking no more comfortable, but less visibly threatening. And across the room are three figures Hitoshi doesn’t recognize. The two closest to the briefcase appear to be guarding it, one in a pin-striped suit, the other with oily black skin that seems to ripple in waves. The third figure is clearly the leader—a short-statured man with dark hair and piercing eyes, a thick fur-trimmed jacket and an air about him that commands attention. Yet the most striking feature of all three are the enormous pointed masks they wear—hooked beaks, like something straight out of a horror film.

Kurogiri places a hand on Hitoshi’s shoulder, holding him still. And it’s a good thing he does, because it’s in the next second Hitoshi notices another figure in the room, unmasked, and much smaller than the others. A child.

A little girl.

She's *tiny* — can't be more than five or six—all pale skin and red eyes, fever-bright with fear. A single horn peaks out from behind long, unwashed hair. She stands a half a step behind the dark-haired man, clutching at the hem of his jacket.

“—supposed to believe she can really do what you say?” Shigaraki's voice cuts through. “She's a child, for fuck's sake, how powerful can she be?”

“You've seen the bullets in action, haven't you?” the man says calmly. “What more do you need?”

“Overhaul,” Giran says. “We're not trying to be unreasonable. You have to understand, this is a large investment for us. We just want to make sure the supply doesn't run the risk of drying out.” He gestures to the girl, who flinches back at the attention. “A simple demonstration is all we ask.”

“I told you,” the man—Overhaul—says, “she doesn't work on command. She can't control it—it's dangerous.” He flexes a hand. “She's just a vessel for the product. I'm the one who extracts it.”

“Not to worry,” Kurogiri steps in smoothly, and gives Shinsou a small nudge forward. “We have a means of counteracting that.”

The man turns a long, calculating look over Hitoshi, eyes narrow with an intense recognition. Hitoshi doesn't bother to meet the gaze—he can't tear his eyes from the girl. She cowers behind him and stares back, and *god*, those *bandages*. They litter her forearms from knuckle to elbow, dirtied and frayed, stained the colour of rust.

“What's going on?” he breathes, horrified.

“Shinsou,” Kurogiri says. “We'd like a demonstration of the girl's quirk.” He gestures to one of the other men guarding the briefcase, the one whose skin seems to be covered in that layer of oil. “If you wouldn't mind.”

“Hey, whoa, no fuckin' way,” the guy says. “She's not using that fucking thing on me.”

“Shut it, Shizuma,” Overhaul says, eyes never once leaving Hitoshi. “Let him do it.”

Hitoshi finally lifts his gaze, finding Kurogiri's, questioning. They... can't really be doing this, can they?

Kurogiri nods.

Swallowing nausea, he crouches. Overhaul shoves the girl forward, much less gently than Kurogiri did him, but keeps a tight hand around her shoulder.

God. She's trembling.

"Hey," he says, soft as he can. "What's your name?"

She eyes his bloodied face and cowers. What little of her skin he can see beneath the bandages looks raw, red and irritated.

"It's okay," he says. "I know this is scary, but I'm not gonna hurt you. I promise." He holds out a hand.

She hesitates. Looks to Overhaul before reaching back. Her fingers are ice cold, her hand tiny in his, and Hitoshi swears he can feel his heart break.

"My name's Hitoshi," he manages. "What's yours?"

"Eri."

"Eri," he repeats. "That's a pretty name."

"Get on with it," Shigaraki growls.

Hitoshi breathes, long and low, pulls himself together piece by brittle piece. "Eri, can you use your quirk on that man for me? Just for a second."

Her eyes go blank under the command, knees straightening out as she moves calmly over to the man, the movement too smooth for someone so young, too mindless—none of the giddy energy of a typical child. Her horn glows as she raises a hand to his skin, and instantly, it— it begins to *unravel*, from the eyes down, like melting plastic. It bubbles and warps, drips down his face, chokes the cries from his throat as it spills into his mouth, revealing baby-pink skin beneath, shriveled and grotesques, like a snail without a shell.

She stops, turns back to Hitoshi, stare fixed, awaiting another order.

Hitoshi thinks he's going to be sick.

"I'll be damned," Giran whistles.

“Are you satisfied now?” Overhaul says. He wipes his feet, smearing the remains of the other man which have dripped like a puddle across the floor. “As I said, the bullets are imbued with a compounded version of her cells. It won’t revert anyone to state of nonexistence, but it can devastate even the most developed quirk factor.”

“She’s incredibly powerful,” Kurogiri says.

Overhaul’s grip tightens as he tears her back, and it jerks her from the trance. Her eyes widen and start to water.

“You’ll pay up if you want any part of that power,” Overhaul says.

“Of course,” Kurogiri says. “As agreed. When will the next batch be ready?”

Overhaul casts his eyes over Eri, calculating. “End of the week. We’ll have them to drop-off point by Thursday.”

Hitoshi knows he should be paying attention, should be memorizing every word out of their mouths, but in this moment, he couldn’t care less. “Hey,” he says softly, recapturing Eri’s attention. “Hey, don’t cry. You did really good.”

She sniffles. “I hurt him.”

“No, no, it’s okay. Look.” And then, the power of his quirk once more layered over her, “You can put him back now.”

She does as told, hand reaching fearlessly into the gory remains, which begin to bubble and swirl under the touch, crawling like a living thing back up the shriveled body to reform into the perfect image of its previous state.

Hitoshi releases her instantly. “See? No harm done.”

She nods, swipes at her tears like she’s afraid to let anyone see them. Instinctively, Hitoshi reaches out, but once again, Overhaul pulls her back.

Kurogiri clears his throat. “That will be all, Shinsou. Thank you.”

He stares. He can’t— He can’t just *leave* her. “But—”

“Get out,” Shigaraki snaps.

Numb, Hitoshi can do nothing but stumble to his feet. Eri’s eyes track

the movement, like the rest of her body hardly dares take a step without Overhaul's permission. Anger and sorrow come to a boil in his chest. He couldn't— There's no possible way he could take the others. He's vastly outnumbered, not to mention outskilled, but for a second, the urge to do so nearly whites out his vision. They're *hurting* her and he's— He's just expected to *leave*?

"Shinsou," Kurogiri says.

He nods haltingly, shuffles to the door. Hesitates, casting one last look over his shoulder.

The door slams closed in his face.

In the quiet of the hallway, his breath sounds unnaturally loud, ragged, each inhale like a sharp stab of pain. He can barely force his feet to move another step, fists clenched, pulse pounding behind his eyes. It's not a minute before the door opens again, and Hitoshi jerks with a full-body flinch, terrified to be caught loitering. But it's just Kurogiri.

"Allow me to explain," he says. And then, when Hitoshi can't respond but to glare from behind shaking breaths. "Shinsou, please. It's not what it looks like."

"She's a child," he spits. "You saw her arms. Those scars."

"They weren't made by us."

He nearly laughs. "And that makes it *better*?"

Kurogiri doesn't deny it, doesn't so much as show an inch of offense at the tone. He simply holds out a hand, eyes patient and searching. Hitoshi looks at it with disgust, with fear, like he didn't all those weeks ago.

He takes it anyway.

Kurogiri teleports them outside, to a quiet corner of the lot, blisteringly cold under bright, clear skies. The wind snakes under his clothes, breathes ice over his skin, grounding, and his breath slowly evens out. Kurogiri gives him the space, eyes low, and for a long moment, neither speak.

"We were both looking at the same thing back there, but I suppose what we *saw* was very different, wasn't it?" He lifts his eyes, fixes

Hitoshi with a somber, almost regretful stare. “You saw a person, while I only saw the opportunity she presented. That’s why I admire you, Shinsou. Everything you’ve been through, and you still see people far better than most do. Far better than I do.”

Hitoshi breathes. Doesn’t speak.

“But we aren’t so different. We want what’s best for people, for society as a whole, without doing any more damage than we have to. So I understand why you’re upset about the girl, but trust me when I say that it truly is for the greater good. As much as I detest Overhaul’s methods, with them, with the girl’s quirk and the weapons built from it, we can create something amazing, something powerful enough to fracture the foundation of hero society. You understand, don’t you?” And there’s something imploring, something genuinely *pained* about the tone. “I would never allow a child to be hurt simply for the pleasure of it.”

Are they? Not so different? Hitoshi thinks. In another life, if he’d been weaker, lonelier. If his resentment and jealousy had broken him down sooner, turned him bitter and angry—if he hadn’t had his own heroes, like mom, like Aizawa, to look up to—could he have turned out like the League? Like Kurogiri?

“Yeah,” he whispers. “I understand.”

The Anonymous Source

Chapter Notes

Hello!

I'm going to be a Responsible Writer for once in my life and let you guys know in advance, there probably won't be another chapter until the end of April. I am in my last semester at university and, you know, actively dying, so. There's that. I'm still writing whenever I can, and if fortune should strike and I get another chapter polished up before then, I'll definitely toss it up here for you guys.

Thank you so much for your patience, enthusiasm, and kind words of support. I am having so much fun sharing this story with you guys. Please know that I would happily die for any single one of you.

Enjoy the obligatory Buddy Cop Chapter.

Thursday evening, Shouta's not five minutes out of UA, still reveling in the freedom of having abandoned 1-A to training with Ectoplasm, when his phone rings, shooting dead his dreams of night catching up on grading.

He's thirty stories up and swinging with perhaps more force than necessary, wrists tight with the stress of his grip. He hardly pauses in the maneuver, unzips his phone from its protective pocket and slaps to his ear while he fumbles one-handed with a catch-and-release.

"Prius is on the move again," says Tsukauchi in way of greeting.

Shouta sighs, breath stolen by the wind. Ever since the hits they got on the license plates Shinsou gave them, Tsukauchi's taken to dubbing the drivers after their car models. It's annoying, if admittedly easy to remember, and Shouta stifles his complaints, grateful to at least be kept in the know. It's *technically* police jurisdiction now, and really, if Tsukauchi wants to fill his reports with affable nicknames for the criminals in question, well, who's Shouta to ruin his fun.

In the week that they've been tailing them, they've got traffic cams putting at least three of the drivers all over the city, some as far as Tokyo. Prius hasn't yet given them much of interest, but they've got

the Honda N-BOX and Daihatsu Mira drivers pinned around known gang territory, recruitment spots and some of the seedier strip-clubs downtown. They've got a running bet that Honda's got some kind of drug-lab running out of his townhouse. A single drive-by with the windows cracked earlier in the week was all they needed to catch the ammonia fumes pouring out from the shuttered windows and drooping ceiling. Tsukauchi's already called for the warrant, and in the meantime, occupies himself by giving Shouta the play-by-play every time one of them so much as scratches their ass.

"Prius, huh? Anything interesting?" Shouta asks, offhanded. He adjusts the phone, yanking on his weapon to release it's hold on the bar-rails of an unsuspecting balcony.

"Grocery store."

Shouta scowls. The damn thing's caught. He cradles the phone between his shoulder and ear and uses both hands to pull. "You called to tell me about his plans for dinner?"

He can *hear* the smirk in Tsukauchi's voice. "Hey, Eraser, I'm just doing my job. For all we know, these could be nefarious groceries."

"I hate you."

"He bought, like, six bags of carrots. Who *needs* that?"

With a final tug, the weapon snaps free, sends Shouta plummeting down onto an office rooftop. He rolls with the fall, breath knocked clear, and blinks to clear the stars from his eyes. "If you're done," he wheezes, "I've got actual work to do."

He does, too. Winter break is fast approaching, and Shouta's got his hands full drafting essay prompts for the students to work on over the break. He's also still working the occasional patrol shift, not to mention all the extra time he's putting in with Tsukauchi to tail the drivers. It's a grueling schedule, but it's good. It's purposeful. Keeps his mind from running all over the place.

"Alright, alright. I did actually call for a reason," Tsukauchi says.

"Work-related?"

"Consider it a personal curiosity."

"If this is about the anonymous source again, I swear—"

“It’s not, it’s not, god,” Tsukauchi laughs. “You hero types and your damn secrets.”

“Uh-huh,” Shouta rolls his eyes, clambers up and dodges a startled pigeon as he flips up onto the ledge of the building. The wind is brutal up here—he cradles the phone in the nook of his shoulder to protect it, and flops down, legs dangled over the edge. At least it’s a nice view. Smoke-stacks blur the horizon, but the air is mostly clear around this part of town, courtesy of the hospital nearby. The sky is icy-blue and painfully bright, snow clouds hanging low over the mountains in the distance. “Go ahead.”

“Okay, so. The guys down in forensics are trying to build a psych profile. You know, for the traitor, the— uh, UA kid. Shinsou,” Tsukauchi says, casual as you like, and just like that, the view turns sour. “It’s been slow going since his mom won’t talk to—”

“The point?” Shouta bites. He rubs his chest offhandedly, like he could massage out the ache.

Tsukauchi audibly shrugs. “Some of the guys are really hung up on it. And it got me thinking. I remember seeing him on TV at the UA Sports thingy. He just— I don’t know— He didn’t seem the *type* to turn, you know? The Bakugou Katsuki type, the risky type. I mean, they say it’s always the ones you least expect, but still.”

“What’s this got to do with me?”

“Well, you worked with him, right? I was wondering if you ever saw anything? Amy red flags?”

“No,” he says, sharp. “I didn’t teach in his stream.”

“Never crossed paths?”

“Didn’t even know him,” Shouta says, and prays Tsukauchi’s lie-detector quirk doesn’t work through the phone.

“Ah,” Tsukauchi sighs. “Too bad.”

“Yeah. Too bad.”

There’s a long pause. The wind has died down, but the chill lingers. A hollow numbness begins to spread through the tips of Shouta’s fingers. He considers hanging up.

“So-ooo,” Tsukauchi says, casting a lifeline into the awkward silence.
“The warrant’s in for Honda. Wanna help me bust in?”

“*Fuck*. Yes,” Shouta pleads.

If Tsukauchi can sense any leftover tension on the drive, he astutely doesn’t mention it.

It puts them in a familiar if restless silence where they wait, lights off in an unmarked patrol car, half a block down from the house in question—which, as it turns out, is looking more like a drug den by the second. There’s a strange smoke leaking from the kitchen window, and the front stoop is occupied by several individuals of varying degrees of undress, passing a joint between themselves. Shouta sets his eyes over them, but doesn’t recognize Honda. Tsukauchi, for his part, seems content to wait for an appearance.

Shouta doesn’t normally work with others, but he supposes, if he had to, Tsukauchi’s not bad. He’s a good man, and a better detective, but best of all, he knows when to be *quiet*. Shouta shudders to think of the first—and last—stakeout he ever did with Hizashi. Eight hours in a car with that man was nearly enough to turn anyone into a villain.

“Lights just went out,” Tsukauchi mumbles, and Shouta re-centers his thoughts. There’s shadowed movement behind the blinds of the front room, and a moment later, the front door opens.

Shouta straightens. “We been spotted?”

“Don’t think so,” Tsukauchi says, and peers over the wheel. The new figure’s undeniably their driver—fucking *goddmanit*, he’s spent so long listening to Tsukauchi call him *Honda* he can’t even remember the bastard’s real name.

He exchanges a few words with the guests on his stoop while he locks the door, then steps over and around them. He’s holding a briefcase tight to his side, and headed for his namesake car, strides long and quick, posture hunched. Nervous.

“*That’s* not suspicious,” Tsukauchi says, and reaches for the door.

"Wait." Shouta stills the arm. They've got the warrant. They can bust this place any time. But *this*? "You can't tell me you're not a little curious."

They trade a look, the unspoken question palpable. Shouta waggles his eyebrows.

"Yeah, all right," Tsukauchi mutters, and puts the keys in the ignition. "Let's go for a ride, Honda."

They follow at a distance, lights low and far enough back to blend between the evening traffic. Dusk paints the streets in faded reds and oranges that seem to wash the city of its usual grime, while Honda leads them through a commercial neighbourhood, past shuttered storefronts and glitching neon billboards. The streets empty out, and Tsukauchi widens the distance between them, until at last, Honda pulls off onto gravel.

Ahead, a gated scrapyard, towering piles of warped metal and rubber. The car lurches into park, but no one doesn't get out.

Tsukauchi cuts their lights and drifts to a silent stop. They're two blocks down, no more than 100 yards, but their cover's shit.

"We can get closer on foot," Shouta says, eyeing the shadows that stretch from the buildings on the other side of the road. Honda's facing the scrapyard—if they keep low, they can stay out of his mirrors.

Tsukauchi nods, eyes still locked ahead. There's a definitive *click*, the cool slide of metal as he unholsters his gun, the other hand already wrapped around the door handle. His eyes flit over. Shouta meets them, nods.

The air outside is cold and stale, sharp with rust and exhaust—the metallic odor of industry. Shouta closes the door softly, then ducks around the car and into the waiting shadows, the fabric of his weapon gathered and ready to strike. Together, he and Tsukauchi creep forward, backs pressed to the building. There's an alley ahead, spilling light onto a sliver of the street. Shouta darts across, lands in a crouch and glances back.

Tsukauchi doesn't move, eyes wide and rigid, knuckles white around the grip of his pistol. Shouta traces the gaze back, and there, gathering like mist not twenty feet in front of Honda, sits a swirling, black portal.

His heart jolts as a cold familiarity settles over him, locking him in place while a single, shadowed figure emerges. Kurogiri.

He's as immaculately dressed as ever, cuffs buttoned, tie expertly knotted, hands neatly folded around the strap of a duffle bag. The car flashes its lights, and Kurogiri lifts the bag in response. A moment later, the door opens, and out slides Honda, briefcase in hand.

The pieces slot together, and it's too good—too *perfect*. Weeks of living off the scraps of Shinsou's contact with the League, and suddenly one of its top members is standing a mere sixty feet away. It's clearly got to be some kind of drop-off, and a damn important one too, if *Kurogiri* himself is the one collecting it.

Shouta chances a glance back to Tsukauchi, sees him lift the handheld radio from his belt, tapping in some sort of code. Backup's on the way, but who knows how long.

His eyes flit to Shouta's, and any doubt he had is dispelled, by the reflected understanding, the bone-deep conviction. Backup or no, there is no way in *hell* they are letting this opportunity slip by.

Shouta slips on his goggles and sweeps from the shadows, ducking low around Honda's car. His weapon whips out and snakes around Honda's neck and, before either man can react, wrenches him to the ground. He chokes and flails, the briefcase flung from his hand.

Shouta tosses him back, steps around and locks his onto Kurogiri. He spots the exact moment it hits—those glowing eyes shooting wide as his quirk fails him, smothered like a doused flame.

But he doesn't run. Instead, Kurogiri comes barreling straight for him.

Shouta flings out the weapon but Kurogiri dodges, ducks low and—

Grabs the briefcase.

Shouta readjusts, aims, and Tsukauchi's gunshots crack through the air, kicking up dust between them, and Kurogiri scrambles back, case in hand. With no time to reel in, Shouta drops the weapon, settles for tackling the fucker to the ground.

They go down in a tangle of limbs, the briefcase coming up between them to crack Shouta in the side of the head. Kurogiri's surprisingly solid beneath the mist of his edges, breath hot and ragged against Shouta's face as he struggles. Another shot goes wide and Shouta rolls, hoping to give Tsukauchi a better aim. He's heavier than he looks too, and the realization comes a moment too late—Kurogiri hefts himself and pins Shouta down in the same breath, fist cracking down across his face.

His nose *snaps* with a hot spew of blood, eyes instinctively scrunching closed, and in a second, Kurogiri's weight evaporates off his chest. Instead, he opens tear-stained vision to the sight of Honda, struggling to his feet and now leveling a gun of his own.

Shouta swears and rolls, barely manages to fling himself around the car as another two shots go wild. He reels in his weapon and ducks around the back, hears splintering metal and shattering glass as Honda empties his clip into the opposite side, then, the most awful sound yet—Tsukauchi, voice choked with a shout of pain.

Shouta leaps, sails over the car and feet-first into Honda, knocking the gun from his hand and sending him sprawling. He rolls through the landing, is on top of Honda in the next second. He wrenches his arm and twists it around his back, pins him to the dirt with a knee against his spine, stares and keeps staring. The bastard hasn't shown a quirk yet, but Shouta's not taking any more chances.

"Tsukauchi," he calls over his shoulder, "You good?"

"Just grazed," comes the wheezed reply, and Shouta's not too swept up in the relief of hearing him *at all* to miss the strain in his voice. But there's the familiar wails of sirens in the distance already, so he holds tight, eyes locked to the back of Honda's head, pulse pounding behind his broken nose.

It doesn't take long. He hears the crunch of tires over gravel and the sirens cut out to footsteps, a chorus of voices that startle with recognition. It's another few minutes before an armored truck pulls into the lot, a squadron of heavily-armed officers swooping in to gather Honda—still writhing and spitting and swearing up a storm. Shouta watches until the very last second, double-checking the restraints before he finally allows the truck to pull away.

The whole street is a flurry of activity behind him—yellow police cordons wrapped like a shield around a cluster of evidence markers,

tracking where the fight took place. He sees his own blood splattered across the dirt, bullet casing and broken glass glittering where they've fallen. A gloved officer kneels over one of the shells and gently swabs the inside of the casing.

He gives them a wide berth, beelines instead for the ambulance which sits parked across the street. A paramedic startles over his blood-splattered face, but Shouta waves them back. Tsukauchi sits in the back of the ambulance, one arm in a sling and a foil blanket draped around his shoulders, head bowed and hair slick with sweat.

"How bad?"

Tsukauchi glances up, face waxy pale. "Not so bad I can't stick around to give a statement."

Shouta's not buying it. He turns to the nearest paramedic. "What are they testing those bullets for?" The League was *buying* them, for fuck's sake. It can't be good.

"We won't know for sure until we get the results back." And then, to Tsukauchi. "I'm sure you'll be fine, detective. The numbness is likely just the shock."

The assuaging seems to have the opposite effect. Tsukauchi starts up with a jerk, the blanket slipping from his shoulders. "Say that again."

"It's probably just—"

"Not that," he says, voice tight with desperation. "The first part. The lie."

The paramedic hesitates, and Tsukauchi rounds on Shouta instead. "Tell me a lie."

Shouta stares, cold with a grim, creeping realization. "You're a terrible detective."

Tsukauchi's lips go tight, pale and bloodless. "We don't need to wait for the test results. I know what those bullets do," he says. "They erase quirks."

In Control

Chapter Notes

Hello again!

Folks! I have been BLESSED with not one but TWO absolutely gorgeous pieces of art in the interim since last chapter! Y'all PLEASE go leave some love for the generous and talented itsumi-art over on instagram [here!](#) and ialmostdroppedmycroisaunt over on tumblr [here!](#) I am a 19th century peasant and they are the bountiful harvest which has graced my barren land. It is by their grace that my children shall survive the brutal winter.

That's all from me! See you again uuuuuuh at some point!

Toga manages to knock him flat on his ass a grand total of eight times before lunch--a personal best, up from yesterday's six. He hasn't quite caught his breath--and is already tensed to dodge the incoming kick, because Toga *never* lets him catch his breath--when the warehouse rings with a shout that, for once, isn't drawn from Hitoshi's mouth.

Across the floor, at the base of the stairs, Kurogiri collapses in a heap, a swirling mass above him where he just fell through.

There's a flurry of movement from the viewing deck, curious faces pressed to the windows, drawn by the commotion, and a second later, Compress and a few others come racing down the stairs.

"What's going on?"

Kurogiri surges to his feet, the cloud of black leaking out from his collar bigger than Hitoshi's ever seen it, spiking in time with his erratic breath. His normally immaculate suit hangs ragged, covered in dust. He clutches a briefcase, but curses and slams it to the floor, sending it skidding into the shadows.

The reaction's enough to draw a start from Dabi, palms igniting with flame. "What the fuck happened?"

"Pros," Kurogiri says at last, voice a growl, laden with a fury Hitoshi's never heard. "The Eight Precepts has been made. Either their guy turned on them or he's an *idiot*. He was followed to the drop-off spot."

The bullets, Hitoshi realizes, and eyes the briefcase.

It's been over a week since he met with Eri and that man--Overhaul. Since then, there hasn't been so much as a single mention of the encounter, as though Kurogiri's made the rounds and warned anybody from bringing it up. Hitoshi's subtle inquiries have all been deflected--by the others with vulgar disinterest, and by Kurogiri with softly worded platitudes.

He can't risk prying again without showing his hand, but the real frustration comes from the fact that he *had* all the answers, *right* in front of him, and he ignored them. He fucked up. He let his concern over Eri distract him from paying attention to whatever was *clearly* being plotted in that room. Weapons, designed to de-evolve quirks. Expensive, rare. The last thing the League would do is buy them just to let them sit on a shelf somewhere. But every time he's tried to ask what they're using them for, he gets shot down.

The image of Eri still claws at his mind, nearly real enough to touch. Trembling, afraid, an arm wrapped around her possessively. He was useless in that room. At the end of the day, all his righteous indignation couldn't do anything for her. But he can do something about *this*. He can get another message out. He can warn Aizawa.

If he only knew what he was warning him *about*.

"We should send out a notice," Twice says, and races back up the stairs. "I'll find Giran, he'll let his contacts know."

"You got the stuff though?" Toga asks, stepping around Hitoshi to kick the briefcase back over.

Kurogiri grimaces as he bends to retrieve it. "Lost the cash, though. Straight into the hands of the pros. Tomura will *love* that."

"Well, you seem to have gotten off fine enough." Compress waltzes closer and eyes him over. "Nothing a good dry-clean can't fix, from the looks of it."

Kurogiri adjusts his cuffs, rolls them back to reveal a splatter of red. "I suppose. Thankfully it was just the usual nuisance." He shoots Compress a smirk. "You remember our friend from USJ."

"The astronaut or the one with the goggles?"

Kurogiri laughs. "Goggles. Which, I might add, felt *wonderful* to punch."

“You fought Eraserhead?” The words leap from Hitoshi’s throat as though wrenched out of him, and Kurogiri startles like he hadn’t even realized he was there.

“Ah, yes, I suppose I did,” he says after a long moment, his earlier anger smoothed away, replaced with the poised, too-calm mask he’s balanced all week. “But it’s nothing to concern yourself over. I handled him easily enough.”

Hitoshi doesn’t miss the obvious deflection. But if Kurogiri was panicked enough to stumble in his get-away, surely Aizawa must still have been fighting? One-on-one, there’s no way he’d have lost badly enough to-- to be--

He swallows past the vice of fear. Worry gets him nowhere. Worry gets him distracted. He’s not doing this again.

He breathes. Eyes the case. Tries, “So what’s the plan?”

But it’s too late. He can already feel the shift in the air, the way his question hangs in the silence. Compress looks away. Toga shuffles her feet.

“It’s nothing to worry about,” Kurogiri says, that same mantra, placating, patronizing, *infuriating*. “I, uh-- I suppose I should be getting these to Tomura.” To the same locked door behind which the other bullets are being kept, the same locked door Hitoshi has apparently ostracised himself from ever being invited behind again. All because he dared to show a little fucking humanity.

And he *knows* it’s his own damn fault. He knows he should have just kept it together, played along with Kurogiri’s indifference.

He doesn’t know why he had expected better.

The tension hangs over him for the next few days, frustration bitter on the back of Hitoshi’s tongue. Kurogiri sequesters himself away with Shigaraki and Giran, and the others do a miserable job of pretending not to know why. Hitoshi wouldn’t have needed a single one of Aizawa’s *reading body language* lessons to feel the obvious fire being stocked--the way the others ramp up their own training regimes late into the night, the way they gather, heads bent low in intense discussions, only to straighten and fall silent every time he enters the room.

With little left, Hitoshi takes his only recourse.

Spinner. If nothing else, the guy's good for one thing. Bragging.

He catches him in the kitchen one evening. It's a sad imitation of the one they had at the motel--an old refurbished breakroom from whatever decade this place used to run as a legitimate business, more suited for factory workers heating up microwave lunches than whatever impressive spread of fish Spinner's currently got laid out. Hitoshi hangs in the doorway and watches while he scales and fillets a whole salmon in hardly under a minute. He's really quite good with a blade, if he weren't always such a dick about it.

"You teach yourself how to do that?"

Spinner lifts his eyes. Flips a piece in the air and catches it on the blade. "Used to be a fishmonger over in Osaka."

Hitoshi pockets that bit of information away for later. "Why'd you stop?"

Spinner gives him a *look*. "Wasn't my true calling," he says blandly, and chops down with perhaps more force than necessary. Fish guts spew across the cutting board. "Why? You got culinary aspirations?"

Hitoshi shrugs, takes a seat at the stool across from him. "Nah. I used to dream I'd grow up to be a hero."

Spinner snorts. "Yeah. Keep dreaming."

Hitoshi watches for another minute. It's probably the closest to amicable silence that's ever passed between them. "What about the sword? Teach yourself that too?"

Another look, eyes narrowed. Hitoshi fights the urge to straighten his posture, instead leans over his elbows, gives his best impression of *bored teenager, hesitantly impressed*.

Spinner does a little half-shrug, too casual. God, he really can't resist. "Bullets run out. Swords don't."

"Sure," Hitoshi says, and flicks at a stray scale. "Like the bullets Kurogiri's gathered for whatever big stunt you're all planning."

Spinner lifts a severed head and tosses it into the sink. His eyes are perfectly cold. "What do you know about it?"

"Nothing," Hitoshi says honestly, and this time, he does straighten.

Eyes wide, imploring. “He won’t tell me anything.”

A smirk. “Well, that settles that.”

“I just wanna know,” Hitoshi says. He doesn’t think a *please* will get him anywhere, but maybe something a little closer to home. “I want to help. I want to prove myself.”

Spinner pauses at last, knife lowered. The fish stinks something fierce, but Hitoshi holds still, lets Spinner soak up the moment, until, finally, he cracks. “Fuck, alright, fine.” He points the blade. “But you didn’t hear it from me.”

Hitoshi grins. “Hear what from who?”

He rolls his eyes, then leans in, voice low. “We’re planning a heist.”

Hitoshi nods. He’d figured something of the sort. “Like-- a robbery?”

“Yeah, yeah. Giran wants us to keep up with the political shit, keep ‘getting the message out,’ or whatever. He loves what it’s doing for us in the press.”

“What’s the message this time?”

“I dunno, something about a bailout. Some pro agency went bankrupt and the government just dumped a bunch of money on them to save their asses.” He waves the knife around, splatters of fish flying. “Compress knows the details. The point is, people are pissed, blah-blah, hard-earned tax money, blah-blah. It was something crazy, like, four-billion yen.”

Hitoshi slots the pieces together. “So... we’re going to steal it back?”

Spinner grins. “If they’re getting paid, we might as well make ‘em work for it.”

It’s... actually not the most ridiculous plan Hitoshi’s ever heard. The government has a long history of subsidizing the hero industry, funneling money into private agencies instead of public funding for emergency services. Too often was the day when mom would come home from work complaining about yet another overstuffed waiting room or outdated machine in need of repairs. Hard-earned tax money indeed.

But it’s not the League’s message that matters. Rather, it’s the

opportunity the outing presents. Desecrating a public monument is one thing. Robbing a bank is a whole other game. With stakes that high and everyone distracted, there'd definitely be a moment for Hitoshi to slip from sight and drop another message. He could warn them about the Eight Precepts. He could warn them about *Eri*. He could win back his rapport with the League and rip the rug out from under their feet in one.

"But remember!" Spinner says. "I didn't tell you shit."

"Got it," Hitoshi says. "My lips are sealed."

"So," Hitoshi says, an hour and two shots of vodka later. "What's going on with this heist?"

They're gathered around in the viewing deck, stomachs full of freshly-diced fish, drinks flowing, and the whole room goes silent as a grave. Spinner's eyes are impossibly wide.

"What... do you mean?" Kurogiri asks carefully.

"Aw, man," Twice wails. "We were doing so good. Who blew our cover?"

Hitoshi's eyes narrow. So he was right. Everyone knew. Everyone but him.

"I can help," he says. And then, to Kurogiri alone, "Whatever the plan is, I want to help."

"Shinsou," Kurogiri starts. "Of course, we would love to have you play a part. It's just, considering your aversion to violence, perhaps you'd rather sit this one out."

"What aversion? I've been training with Toga every day."

"Of course, but training scenarios and real life are very different. There can be... unfortunate collateral damages. I don't want to subject you to anything that might upset you."

Hitoshi scowls at the unspoken example, blood thrumming with an electric current. "Training scenarios and *child abuse* are very

different,” he counters, and through the static in his ears, his voice sounds foreign, venomous. “That doesn't have anything to do with it.”

He's met with silence, the League's eyes wide over the rims of their glasses. Only Kurogiri's face softens, like it has all fucking week, like he thinks he needs to fucking coddle him, and the sight makes him, suddenly, brazely, *furious*. So they're willing to use him as their fucking *mascot*, but when it comes down it, they don't trust him for shit. His anger makes no sense, he knows--he doesn't *deserve* their trust, of course--but all the same, he feels the sting of it as if it were them betraying him and not the other way around. What happened to cultivating his abilities? What happened to making him into *something incredible*?

An arm slips around his, jerking him from the spiral. It's Toga, gently but insistently pulling him to his feet. She says something, but Hitoshi can hardly hear over the adrenaline--useless, blood singing for a fight they won't give him. He lets her guide him from the room, out and down the stairs. The main floor of the warehouse is cold and quiet, the light from the viewing deck windows casting them in long shadows. They walk in silence into the dark.

“I told you,” she hums. “Kurogiri likes you.”

“So?”

“So, we've lost people before because they couldn't hold their own against the heroes. Hell, even Kurogiri had a close call the other day, you saw yourself.” She pulls him to a stop, pivots and searches his face. “He's just worried about you.”

Same old excuses. That's always how it happens, isn't it? Aizawa, Kurogiri, it makes no difference. They get rattled, get cold feet, and take him out of the game before he's even gotten a chance to play.

“I like you too, you know. We all do. Even Dabi, I think, and he doesn't like *anything*. ”

He can hardly muster a smile. “Thanks.”

Toga sighs. “Yeah, I know, I'm no good at the whole *words of comfort* thing. But--” She grins, takes his hand again and begins to drag him along, deeper into the dark, open space in the center of the factory floor. “You know what might make you feel better?”

Hitoshi breathes ragged, fists clenched and *aching* for a target. “Yeah, I

think I have an idea.”

He spits blood by the second round, staining dark the concrete at his feet. A well-aimed slice from Toga’s hidden blade slits his forearm and drips in rivulets between the curl of his fist. The pulse from the wound is loud in his ears, steady, grounding.

Above, the light in the viewing deck flickers with the shadows that have gathered surreptitiously by the window, pretending not to watch. He knows Kurogiri is somewhere up there, hanging low behind the others, knows he’s watching too.

Hitoshi smiles, baring bloodied teeth. “Again?”

Toga nods. “Again.”

She comes in fast, blade arched in a swipe, flips it before he can even block, spins around him and catches it in the other hand, nearly taking out his eye in the process. He stumbles, feet caught between hers, falls and cracks his head against the floor.

“Oh, don’t tell me that’s all you’ve got.”

He stands, shakes out the spots in his vision. “Not even close.”

He dodges her first swipe this time, recognizes the footing and ducks under the second before it can extend, and comes up fast enough to land a punch that snaps her head to the side. She reels back with the hit, raises a hand to her jaw. “Aw, that was actually pretty--”

He punches her again, feels her lip split.

She laughs and rolls back to her feet, eyes gleaming. Distance between them now, breaths hard and fast. No more taunts. Just focus.

In the corner of his vision, a flicker. Kurogiri materializes, but hesitates to move closer. Good. Let him watch, let him worry. Let him be as stunned as the rest of them when Hitoshi shows just how much control he really has.

The seconds drag while he and Toga circle each other, trading feints until she locks him in a chokehold he has to claw at her eyes to

escape. Throughout it all, he's cold with focus, calm with the knowledge of the ace up his sleeve, the trap laid out since the first word out of Toga's mouth. He's never used his quirk before--always preferred the genuine hand-to-hand training over an easy victory. But this time, maybe for the first time, he's no longer aiming to watch, no longer aiming to learn. He's only aiming to win.

He can't beat her. Not really. But he doesn't have to.

"Stop," he says, and watches with vindictive glee as she freezes, eyes glassy and vacant, knife an inch from his throat.

Belatedly, Kurogiri's hand lands on his shoulder, where he'd darted in to pull him away.

Hitoshi twists out of the grip, turns and faces him. Forces him to look. "I can help. You know I can."

The hand hangs in empty air, then drops, and for a long moment, Kurogiri says nothing. His eyes flicker to Toga. Back to Hitoshi. Slowly, "What will she remember?"

"Nothing." Then, to Toga, "Stab yourself in the neck."

The blade swipes, Kurogiri shouts.

"Stop," he says calmly.

She does, the tip of the blade just barely resting on her jugular, like it has on his so many times.

He looks straight at Kurogiri. Each word deliberate, he repeats, "I can help."

Breath still loud from his split-second panic, Kurogiri doesn't speak. He looks at Toga. Looks up to the window, where the others aren't even pretending not to watch anymore. Finally, back to Hitoshi. And at last, there's a flicker of that familiar smile. Warm, maybe a little regretful. "I think I begin to understand. I've been... neglecting my promise to you, haven't I?"

The anger doesn't abate entirely, but a part of it bleeds into relief. And this time, when Kurogiri's hand land on his shoulder, Hitoshi lets it stay.

"Holy shit, what?" Toga shouts. "What happened? What'd I miss?"

Kurogiri laughs. “I’ll explain. To both of you.” He grins, and Hitoshi can’t help but return it. “It looks like we have a plan to discuss.”

A Loaded Gun

Tsukauchi's kept under observation long after the bullet wound's sewn closed. Their shared recovery room is a flurry of medical personnel all night, nothing but a screen divider to separate Shouta from view of the poor bastard being hooked up to more machines that he can count. Tsukauchi's monitors are all steady, and he's lucid enough to rib the doctors about *overdoing it a little, dont'cha think?* but Shouta sees the uneasy glances exchanged by the nurses over the results of his blood tests, the murmured conversations about flying in experts for further consultation, and wonders if maybe they're not doing *enough*.

Shouta's nose needs to be re-broken before it can set--a process with which he's plenty familiar at this point in his career. As long as his eyesight's fine, he's not bothered by the black eyes or the slight crook his nose now sports, and coupled with the painkiller's they've got him on, the whole thing goes over gloriously.

He's released before the night is up, but endeavours to visit as much as possible over the next few days, smuggling in takeout and coffee where he can. Tsukauchi seems to be taking it well enough. God knows if it were Shouta in there under 24-hour observation, he'd have snapped and killed someone by now.

From what little he manages to pry out of the doctors between visits, Tsukauchi's the first in the prefecture to be hit with whatever was in those bullets, but there have been a few similar cases in neighbouring cities, all gang-related. All the other victims have had the effects wear off in under 24 hours.

Tsukauchi's well past 72.

"Whatever I got, they think it's something more advanced. Like a newer version of the same product," he says, cross-legged on the bed with a carton of yakisoba balanced on his knees. "Can't wait to be case study in medical journals for years to come."

Shouta schools his face to hide the stab of guilt. Tsukauchi would probably slap him if he so much as voiced it out loud, but he can't help but shoulder responsibility. It was his idea, after all. "We should have waited for backup."

Tsukauchi slurps up a noodle. "And risk losing credit for ol' Honda? No way. I'm getting a promotion for this shit, mark my words."

Shouta's not so sure. Honda--or Yasujima Koitarou, as his name turned out to be--has been in custody for three days, and hasn't so much as dropped a single name. He was a middle man at best, and clearly an expendable one. While the raid on his house revealed where the bullets were being infused, the actual supplies for the drug itself were clearly from somewhere else. A fact on which Yasujima's been decidedly tight-lipped thus far.

"Don't make that face." Tsukauchi flashes a grin. "I'll interrogate the bastard myself once I'm out of here."

Shouta nods, but can't quite manage to meet the smile. Tsukauchi's right though--it's *something*. And coupled with the info they've gathered on the rest of the names Shinsou provided, it's more than they've had in a long time. The warrants are out for every member of the League and then some, interviews conducted with known relatives and associates, piecing together their pasts to help predict their futures. One hideout down, and their supply routes being monitored daily. The League's world gets a little smaller every day. They're closing in.

Just not fast enough.

Shouta manages another few minutes of idle chatter, but eventually, Tsukauchi takes pity, waving him out the door. The black eyes still haven't fully faded, and apparently, *he's even more depressing to look at than usual*. "God, Eraser, go have a drink or something."

Nevermind that it's hardly four in the afternoon and he's *technically* been on patrol for the last hour, the idea admittedly has an appeal. But any fantasies of entertaining the suggestion shrivel and die as he steps outside and spots the crowd mingling in the parking lot like a swarm of flies. They're gathered around a car.

Haru's car.

The sight knocks something loose inside him, a flicker of anger that swims in waves alongside the nausea of guilt. Of everyone tangled up in the story of Shinsou's defection, Haru's the only one who still hasn't given a statement. At Nedzu's suggestion, she won't talk to anyone--not press, not even police. And while it's for good reason, the mystery's made her all the bigger of a target. He sees her picture almost daily in the news--photos snapped every time she so much as dares to step out in public, head always down, steps always brisk.

It looks like they're aiming for a different set of pictures now. For a

moment, Shouta doesn't understand what the cameras are all angled up at, but when he follows their gazes, he sees the tightly shuttered blinds of an office, the lights betraying the occupant inside.

He's across the lot in a heartbeat, swinging around to block the shot of the nearest paparazzi. The shutter clicks just as the man shouts and jerks backwards. "What the hell—"

"Are you illiterate?"

The man sputters. "What?"

"Because those signs make it pretty clear, don't you think?" He jabs a finger in the direction of the gates, where a collection of posters plaster the entrance booth. "No flash photography on hospital grounds." He slides out his badge, raises his voice so the whole gaggle of reporters can hear him. "Or would you rather be accompanied off the premises for breaching privacy and endangering patients?"

He doesn't know if his blackened eyes give credibility to the threat or just make him look like a maniac, but the combination of factors seems to do the trick. There's a murmur, a few swears and scowls, but he waits them out until, begrudgingly, they trickle off.

He watches them go, but the cold prickle of anger only sinks deeper into his shoulders. It's not right. Haru's the most hounded, and yet she knows the least of them all. It's too risky for her to reach out to them on her own, meaning she's always the last one in the loop. He'd called her after he got the note from Shinsou, sure, but things had gotten so hectic afterwards, he'd never found time to follow-up. And Nedzu's certainly making no special efforts to bridge the gap. In the end, she's left to deal with everything alone.

He tears his eyes from the retreating reporters, and catches a flicker of movement from the window above. The blinds have been pulled to the side, and a figure stands silhouetted through the glare of the glass.

He raises a hand.

She watches him for a long moment, expression inscrutable from this distance. Eventually, she gives a slight jerk of her chin and lets the blinds fall closed.

And Shouta--damn it all--feels a tug somewhere behind his breastbone.

He doesn't stop at the front desk this time. He knows where he's going.

Haru opens the door at his knock but doesn't hold it, returns to her chair and collapses back without a word of greeting. Her office is cold, but the air warmed with the scent of something sweet and fermented, and it only takes him a second to pinpoint the source—the bottle of brandy half-empty on the desk, rimmed in a puddle of condensation. An empty glass sits beside it.

A spike of worry courses through him. "Are you drinking at work?"

She levels a long look his way, raises her eyebrows in something like a challenge. "It's my day off. I've been on stress leave since Hitoshi."

Shouta swallows back further comment. He didn't come to here to belittle her. Frankly, he doesn't know *why* he came here, why he didn't turn tail, keep his head down, keep busy. He supposes it's because she can't. She doesn't have the luxury of distraction.

He moves in, takes a seat gingerly across her. "Then what are you doing here?"

She glances to the window, and something in her expression clouds over. "It's worse at home."

The scrutiny, the questions. The ache of loss and the inability to ignore it.

"I'm sorry," he says. "It's not fair."

She laughs. "Which part?"

All of it. "Keeping you in the dark," he settles on. "Making you do—this, all this, alone. You're as much a part of this as we are."

She doesn't say anything, like it's a fact she's already made peace with. But it's *not* fair.

"We've got surveillance set up on two of the League's recruitment locations, thanks to Shinsou," he says suddenly. "We've got their names, we've got their quirks. We know more about their ranks right now than we have since Stain. We're tailing some of their yakuza affiliates even now. Finally got eyes on a guy who's been underground for months. Killed two people and got away with it scot free. We found him. We're going to bring him in. Because of Shinsou."

He feels himself rambling, bites his tongue and forces the words to stop. She probably doesn't give a fuck about the warrants and the unmasked identities, the balance of risk and payoff. She probably just wants her kid back.

But a glance over her expression gives nothing away. She stares at the bottle, eyes glassy and distant. Her lips flicker in the barest of smiles. "His ego's gonna be insufferable when this is all over." She rocks her chair back, reaches into a drawer and pulls out a second glass, slams it down next to the first and fills them both without another word.

Shouta stares, and marvels at how Tsukauchi's suggestion somehow apparently came to fruition after all. He shouldn't take it, he knows. He's on *patrol*, for god's sake. But the gesture is too great, the olive branch too impossible to refuse.

He raises it in an unspoken toast. To Shinsou.

They drink in silence. He watches her expression, the occasional smile, peeking like thin rays of sun from behind clouds of worry and regret. Her eyes ponder the ceiling, working through some private process. "It never gets easier?" she asks, after a minute. "Watching the kids you've poured so much of yourself into-- watching them risk their lives? Before they're even old enough to know what it means?"

"No," Shouta tells her truthfully. "You never stop being scared. You just learn not to show it."

Her eyes fall, land on him, quiet in their understanding. Maybe a little drunk.

"Hitoshi wanted to be a hero ever since he was little. It used to terrify me. I used to *pray* he'd get a quirk like mine. Something-- something that couldn't hurt anyone, couldn't get him hurt," she says quietly. "But then the Brainwashing developed, and it was *so much* worse. Because he didn't hurt anyone, never, not once. But just the fact that he *could* was enough. He was *six*, and all people could talk about was how *dangerous* he was, like he was just a loaded gun waiting to go off."

Shouta knows he's criminally undeserving of this story, of her trust, but Haru's words seem to bleed through with pride, stoking a gentle, sorrowful fire inside him. "He's a good kid," he says weakly, and he knows it's not remotely enough. "Better than anyone's given him credit for. Than I've given him credit for."

Her gaze softens. Some sixth sense goes off in the back of Shouta's head, and he realizes a beat late she's using her quirk. It's surprisingly gentle, a surge of affection warming him from the stomach out. He remembers reading something about it in the file he'd compiled when he'd first starting tailing Shinsou--and doesn't *that* feel like a lifetime ago. The details escape him now, and it's unclear whether she's amplified his emotions or simply shared her own, but either way, someone in this room must love that kid a whole damn lot. Pride and regret swirl together in a rush, a stream that bleeds between them and nearly seems to colour the air, and for a moment, Shouta can do nothing but close his eyes against it.

He opens them again at a buzz in his pocket. A reminder of the outside world like a tap on the glass of a window, piercing the fog of warmth and the sour taste of brandy on his tongue. He lowers his glass and slides out his phone.

It's an emergency alert--a back-up call for municipal police and pro heroes. Villains spotted.

He frowns, feels the prickle of a nagging worry, and knows, with her quirk still activated, she feels it too.

Haru sighs, tips her head back and waves a hand. "Go on then, hero. Make this count."

This. Everything Shinsou's done for them.

Shouta stands. "I will."

The day is cold but clear, gray skies spotted with pale blue high above. On the horizon, low hanging clouds promise snow over the mountains, peering out from behind the gleaming chrome of Musutafu's dense city skyline.

It's a beautiful day in mid-December, and Hitoshi's about to fucking rob a bank.

He takes the front entrance, steps casual and smooth despite the tight, roiling ball of nerves in his gut. It's an old building, European-style, all gleaming marble counters and floors, with a row of tellers to one side

and glass-walled offices to the other. He slips past the line for the automated machines and heads for the nearest employee.

It's busy enough--maybe a dozen customers on the main floor, and who knows how many employees deeper within. Might complicate things, but he supposes the League accounted for that when they decided to stage this thing at 5 o'clock on a weekday afternoon.

After all, you can't put on a show without an audience.

It was a week solid of planning, mornings spent pouring over blueprints and patrol routes and evenings in synchronized training regimes--and who knows much more before then to which he wasn't privy. Hitoshi knows his role inside and out--where to stand, what to say, his cues, his threats and how far to push them. It's risky, all of it--the whole thing poised to topple like dominos at a single misstep. But the League's got a taste for public stunts now, it seems, and ultimately, he'd rather be here, where he can at least try to mitigate the damage. Panicked people are stupid, panicked people take risks, try to play hero, get hurt. The League's only after the money and notoriety, after all, and with his quirk, everything can go smoothly.

That's the plan, anyway. There's a loaded gun in his waistband that says otherwise.

He strolls, hands in pockets, cold under the sweat of adrenaline, straight to the front of the line. His voice hardly shakes. "Can I make a withdrawal?"

"Yeah, uh, sorry, I'm going to need you to get in line," says the teller. She glances up from her keyboard and barely has time to frown.

Hitoshi lets momentum and muscle memory carry him past the horror of what he's about to do, leans in close and whispers, "Don't move."

A disgruntled voice from behind. "Kid, seriously, I was here first."

He flinches, hand frozen where it had flown to the handle of the gun in his belt. *According to plan*, he reminds himself. They counted on this, this is according to plan, and he knows his next step, knows what he has to do, but--

The teller stares, dead-eyed, unmoving, and Hitoshi wonders, a little deliriously, if this is what Nedzu had in mind when he said to compartmentalize.

He spins around, gun leveled. “Hands up and get on your knees.”

There’s a collection of startled gasps, stunned faces peering around from behind the first man, whose eyes have gone wide, stark with fear.

“Get on your *fucking* knees,” he shouts, into the terrified silence. His voice carries over the marbled floor, echoes up the walls, utterly alien.

Doesn’t matter if he has them under his quirk or not—the crowd before him falls, faces sheet-white. No one seems to notice the way the gun trembles so bad it's barely pointed at them at all.

A portal splits wide in the middle of the floor with perfect timing, and dissipates just as quickly. Shigaraki’s at the helm of the formation, eyes cold as they rove the scene, as though dismantling it piece by piece. Behind him comes Kurogiri, Dabi, Spinner, Compress, Magne, and Toga.

They move with a precision Hitoshi’s learned both to fear and awe. Spinner and Magne rush those breaking for the exit, Magne using her quirk to magnetize them back and pin them down, while Spinner makes swipes for anyone brave enough to struggle back to their feet. Toga and Dabi move in the opposite direction, vaulting the counter to round up the tellers still seated behind their desks, before shattering the nearest office wall and slipping through to hunt out those hiding within.

Hitoshi lowers the gun, dropping back to his secondary role with excruciating relief. The clock ticks down in his head, counting everyone off, making sure they’re all in position, and not doing any more damage than they have to. His eyes linger on Shigaraki, whose own gaze snaps up to meet it.

Compress taps his shoulder. Right. Cues.

“Registers open,” Hitoshi tells the woman still under his control. Compress tips his hat in thanks and begins shrinking and stowing away the bills revealed.

Kurogiri watches the proceedings but keeps to the center of the room. He’s one of their strongest, but also their most vulnerable--without him, the exit strategy goes to shit. His quirk isn’t something the League can afford to lose, not before, and certainly not now that they’ve taken to more public outings. There’s a joke in there somewhere, an old line in a bad Quirkfeed article: *Japan’s number one*

most villainous quirk .

The thought cuts off as Shigaraki moves, their central set piece at last claiming the spotlight. He climbs smoothly up onto the nearest counter, makes a slow spin of the room, gathering eyes.

“Five billion yen,” he says, the hiss of his voice sliding over cold floors and vaulted ceilings, slithering beneath Hitoshi’s skin like a snake. “An awful lot of money, don’t you think? Five billion yen. I’m willing to bet that’s a lot more than most of you make, working hard, earning your money.” His eyes linger where his audience visibly shrinks under the gaze, slowly, savouring it. He grins, cracked lips and yellowed teeth, then jumps back down from the counter.

There’s a twitch from Kurogiri. This wasn’t in the script.

“This morning, your government handed it over to Origin Hero Agency. *They* didn’t have to work for it, *they* didn’t have to earn it,” Shigaraki says, louder now. He moves past Hitoshi, nearly brushing shoulders, and leans over the terrified crowd kneeling at their feet. “That’s money out of *your* pockets, into the hands of corruption, of greed. Those who think themselves better than you, simply because of the hands they were born with.” He brushes his fingers along a woman’s jaw, and she jerks back with a strangled breath, eyes pleading.

Hitoshi jolts, fingers curling--

“Shigaraki,” Compress says. He holds up a small bag, marbles of glass clinking within.

Shigaraki frowns. “How much?”

Compress shakes his head. “Not enough.”

“Well,” Shigaraki says, back to the crowd, and lets his fingers flit once again over the woman’s face. “The government gave Origin five billion yen. It’s only fair we should make them work for that money, don’t you think?”

He pulls back at last. Nods to Kurogiri, then circles the counters and disappears along with Compress down the hall towards the vaults. With Shigaraki’s quirk, they’ll take hardly a minute to breach. This, at least, was part of the plan.

Kurogiri steps closer, taking up the threat where Shigaraki did. Toga

and Dabi return from the offices a moment later, throwing another armful of workers to their knees. Spinner moves in on cue, trading off for Dabi to guard the exits--his and Magne's quirks are more suited for long-range, if anyone makes a break. Just like they planned. Not a word is needed between them, and Hitoshi breathes long and low, turns just slightly so the others can't see the quiver of his hands. Just like they planned. It's fine. It's just like they planned.

Hitoshi gives himself three steps back, slow, watching for a reaction between each one. He counts the seconds, presses his back to the wall, sweat gathering on his palms. He has to readjust the grip on the handle or risk the gun slipping from his fingers.

He slides another foot down the wall. If he leaves just enough space, one of the hostages might try to slip through, and if he's quick enough, in the commotion, he might be able to drop his message for Aizawa.

He breathes. Lets his eyes drop from the others and case the room, casting about for somewhere hidden enough to go unnoticed. He eyes the ten-foot gap to the counters. If he can get behind them, maybe.

He glances down the hall where Shigaraki and Compress went. No sign of their return yet. He glances behind him, down the opposite hall.

And meets the eye of a thin, balding man in janitorial garb. Mop in hand and bucket of water at his feet, earbuds dangling around his neck. Entirely hidden from the rest of the League's view.

For a terrible second, Hitoshi fears the man will shout, will run, will try something monumentally stupid. But his eyes fall to Hitoshi's gun, and he doesn't move an inch.

Hitoshi jerks his chin. *Go.*

Shocked into motion, the man scrambles back. His feet hit the bucket and he stumbles, mop clattering to the floor.

Spinner whirls about at the sound, growls and springs down the hall. The man hardly gets his feet under him before Spinner tackles him to the floor, sending the buckle toppling and its contents spewing across the floor.

"Piece of shit," Spinner growls, and wrenches him up by a fistful of hair. The man cries out, legs kicking for purchase as Spinner bodily

drags him out into the lobby. “Thought you were gonna be clever, huh? Thought you were gonna be a hero?” He wrenches the man’s head back, in full view of the crowd, of everyone, and raises his sword to the man’s neck. The skin gives no resistance, spewing red from the slightest pressure. A single flick of his wrist and the man would be dead.

Hitoshi’s gun is pressed to the back of Spinner’s head before he even registers the movement. “Don’t.”

The air goes out of the room, nothing but the man’s pained wheeze and Spinner’s low growl. He doesn’t move. “What the *fuck*, Shinsou?”

“We came here for a reason,” Hitoshi pleads. “This isn’t it.”

Spinner drops the man without flair. He hits the floor and scrambles back, blood pulsing down his neck, the red of it stark in Hitoshi’s peripheral. Spinner slowly turns, face creased with rage, like he could slap the gun out of his hand and the life right out of his body.

Before he can raise a hand, a gunshot cracks through the air. With a spray of blood, the world explodes into chaos.

Not Finished Yet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There's a barricade set up in the parking lot, maybe fifty yards out from the front doors, squad cars angled across the lot to give extra cover. Shouta spots at least a dozen figures clad in full riot gear as he swings in, swarming like bees to a hive, crouched low and surrounding the building on all sides. There's a smell tent set up behind the cordons, a commanding officer watching the field from within and barking orders through a headset.

Shouta makes a beeline and flashes his badge, skips straight to the, "How can I help?"

The commander gives him a once-over, lingering where the bruising around his nose hasn't quite faded. Her name flashes to mind--Captain Serizawa Yuma. She's in her fifties or older, gray hair and hard eyes that speak to experience. They've worked together a few times, and she already knows his skillset. She nods, like she's thinking the same thing, waves someone over to bring Aizawa an earpiece of his own.

"At least a dozen hostages. Six or seven hostiles. The cams are down, but it looks like the League. They appear to be armed."

The declaration hits like a jolt of lightning--sets his heart off racing with a familiar ache. Serizawa's watching him with narrowed eyes, so he schools his face, slides on his goggles. "Armed?"

"Firearms."

He frowns. "Not their usual style."

She gestures to the bank. "Not their usual target."

True. And firearms aren't necessarily a problem fit for a quirk like his. Still, "Causalities?"

"None yet."

"So they want the money?"

"Seems like it."

A little out of character for the League. They've had no trouble financing their operations in the past; why the sudden change? Even if the destruction of their bases at Kamino Ward and Mountainside are starting to add up, there are a million better--and subtler--ways to cover the losses. Shouta grimaces. Smells like another stunt.

"They have civilians gathered in the lobby, about ten metres from the doors, but out of view from the windows," Serizawa continues. "Second story's open floor, so we've sent snipers across the street to see if they can get an angle."

Shouta eyes the narrow ledges of the second floor, and unravels his weapon. "I can get there faster."

She nods. "Cover from the south-east. Don't engage."

"Standing orders?"

"We're prepped to raid, but we need to make sure they don't get the idea to make this a hostage situation."

"They won't," Shouta says. "Not with Kurogiri there. They have an easy out. Hostages will complicate things. They'll only stay as long as they need to."

Her mouth sets in a grim line. "So we wait them out?"

Shouta nods. It seems their best bet. To hold ground and fucking pray this doesn't turn out to be anything more than it looks like. "I'll let you know what I see up there."

He makes easy work of scaling the building--south-east wall, as directed. The sun's begun its steady pitch down for the evening, painting this side of the street in just enough shadow for him to slip into place confident he's undetected. The windows are locked but thankfully aren't barred, but the ledges are thin and the stone slick with frost, a cold that bleeds through the touch and sets into his bones.

His best sights look over a row of cubicles, glass walls and an open landing that wraps around the second floor and drops over the lobby below, leaving him with a view of about half the room. He counts fourteen hostages, but from the way they're gathered, there could be more out of sight.

He spots a few familiar figures--faces he remembers from the

catastrophe over the summer. The young man with the dark scars and blue fire guards the exit. The lizard-like man waves a sword over the hostages, crowding them closer. Since Shinsou's intel drop, he's finally got names for them--Dabi, Spinner, another he recognizes as Magne.

He spots Kurogiri too. The bastard. Shouta's nose still aches with the reminder of the last time they met, and his eyes narrow into a glare as he takes him in. He keeps to the center of the room, quirk loose and billowing smoke so he looks bigger than he is, more threatening. Shouta bets it's a strategy to draw out attacks from his weak points too. Can't hit a guy when you can't see where his real body starts and ends. That, too, is a lesson he knows first-hand.

"At least fourteen hostages. Eyes on four hostiles," he murmurs into his earpiece. "Kurogiri's confirmed." And *god*, any other day, Shouta'd plant his ass right here, pin Kurogiri down with his stare and let the police storm the place, let the League scramble for cover.

But with hostages, it's not worth it. To let the League escape with money is one thing, but to let them escape with innocent lives in another.

"Hold fire, they don't seem to--"

He freezes.

A blanket of static roars through his ears, blocking out Serizawa's response, as a flicker of movement draws his eye. It only takes him a second to recognize the figure that steps into view, for panic to come to a screeching boil in his chest.

Shinsou.

What the *fuck* is he *doing* here?

He's dressed in dark but unremarkable clothes, the pallor of his face standing out all the more for it. His posture's a strange blend of rigid and forcefully relaxed, shoulders low and back curved, like he's trying to make himself as small as possible. And he's... moving, just barely, steps slow and halting, backwards towards the wall. Violet eyes flit between the League, and no one looks back.

Then his gaze changes, to something out of sight, and there's the barest pause, a flicker of surprise and--is he shaking his head?

A blur of movement startles them both, Shinsou going rigid as the

lizard--Spinner--darts from sight. He reappears a moment later, claws tangled in the hair of a flailing civilian.

Shouta feels a sick jolt of dread, and the voices in his ear climb to a senseless crescendo. Spinner jerks the man's head back and forces him to his knees, angles the blade against his throat. In an instant, Shouta snags the flashlight from his toolbelt and smashes it against window, standing orders damned, tucks and rolls through the falling glass, straightens just in time to see Shinsou dart forward and--

And raise a *gun* to the lizard's *head*.

The static abates, for just a second, and--

--fire at will."

There's the pop of a gunshot and a window explodes in a shower of glass. Spinner buckles with a spray of gore, and not a second later, the doors crash open as civilians shriek, more gunshots joining the first, *ping* ing off marble and chrome. Shouta ducks below the veranda railing as a swarm of armored police storm the lobby to meet the ripple of blue fire and black smoke, the crackle of electricity from the tasers and batons, and the entire room collapses into the chaos of battle.

Shouta's gaze zeros in on a single figure--Shinsou, diving for cover behind the teller's counter as bullets sail overhead. Heart racing, he wraps a tendril of his weapon over the railing, and dives after him.

Gunshots erupt like a storm, the drum of thunder in his pounding heart and the flurry of chaos in the room around him. The wet spray of Spinner's blood is hot against his skin, the rest of his body ice-cold with panic as he drops to the floor. He has just enough time to meet the wild-eyed gaze of the janitor on the floor beside him--thank fuck thank *fuck* he's *alive*--before wordless instinct takes over, adrenaline and fear tearing under his skin as he scrambles madly for cover.

Hitoshi's never been so terrified in his fucking life.

He claws across the glass-littered floor, feels the wash of Dabi's fire overhead, the magnetic tug of Magne's quirk, screams and screams

and *screams* from the room behind him, before he drags himself over the nearest counter and plummets gracelessly to the floor behind it.

He throws his back to the counter, knees to his heaving chest and still white-knuckled around the gun he didn't realize he was still clutching. Behind him, screams and gunfire wage war--he makes out the crackle of a taser and a shout of pain from Kurogiri. He squeezes his eyes shut, opens them again just as a blur passes overhead, a dark figure sweeping down.

His arm shoots out, levels the gun between goggled eyes.

The thunder snuffs out, falls to quiet echo, like a storm raging a great distance away. He feels only the winds of it--distinctly numb, drowned. A glacial paralysis sets in, and he knows what he's looking at, who he's seeing, but it's like it doesn't quite register--a picture, two dimensional, colours and shapes without substance.

Shinsou, Aizawa says. Shinsou. It's okay. You're okay.

Hands rise, don't quite touch. Hovering. There's a bubble of pressure behind his eyes, a faint ache, an emptiness. Like Aizawa's just picked up his quirk and packaged it away. Shinsou. Hey. Hey, look at me. Let's put that down.

The gun dips, but doesn't drop, limbs locked, refusing to obey. A hand closes around the barrel. Drags his arm down like a leaden weight. We're going to get you out of here. I'm going to get you out.

Aizawa's hand slides higher, wraps warm fingers around his frozen wrist, and the touch sets lines of fire across his skin, cracking open the shell of ice, until every stuttered breath and every careful step and every single fucking second of doubt and worry and fear come roaring up through his mind--a wave crashing to shore five weeks too late, wracking him, leaving him cold, and Aizawa is *here*, right in front of him, *I'm going to get you out*, right here, safety, the finish line, right *here*, all of it, everything he's done, could end *right here*--

He jerks back. "There's a girl," he chokes. "A little girl. They're experimenting on her, the yakuza--"

"Shinsou--"

He's not finished yet. He drops the gun and fumbles a hand into his pocket, closes it around a crushed cigarette, folded paper smudged with ink. "Her name is Eri. They're using her quirk to-- to engineer

weapons. Bullets.”

“Hitoshi--”

He’s not *finished*. “I don’t know where she is. They won’t tell me. You have to-- She needs help. I can’t-- I’m not--”

Aizawa reaches for him again, but Hitoshi stills him with a hand around his wrist, mechanically forcing the note into his fingers. He’s not finished yet. *He’s not finished yet.*

“You need to *listen to me*,” he says, and his hand around Aizawa’s wrist *squeezes*. “She needs your help more than I do. It’s all in the note. And more about their quirks. And recruitment locations, business fronts.” But it’s not *enough*. And that’s the crux of it--there’s so much he still doesn’t know, so much *more*. Aizawa opens his mouth but Hitoshi presses, “I can get more. I can do more. Aizawa, you have to let me do more.”

Aizawa watches him, utterly indecipherable behind the goggles, the yellowish bruising he’s only just noticed swallows the bridge of his nose. It strikes Hitoshi as inordinately important--this tiny detail, this old wound, half-healed. They’ve both been fighting their own battles--opposite sides but the same team. They’re still on the same team.

There’s a beat, and Hitoshi feels the cold steel of Aizawa’s quirk release from around his mind. For a second, he can do nothing but blink in shock as Aizawa casts a quick glance over the edge of the counter, then ducks back, mouth grim. “Kurogiri’s down. He’s not going to get out of this one. You have a backup plan?”

Hitoshi’s chest goes tight. He chances a glance of his own, sees fire and flashing steel, a hail of bullets. Kurogiri’s curled on the floor a dozen feet away, the wire of a stun gun shooting tiny arcs of electricity into his spasming chest.

Spinner’s managed to drag himself from the center of the room, leaving dark streaks of red, and Hitoshi’s stunned by cold-hot relief that shudders through him at the sight. He sees Compress and Shigaraki too, back from the vaults, crouched low in the corridor across the room. Shigaraki’s eyes are locked to where Kurogiri lies, but any attempt to reach him sends him scurrying back as the police unload their guns from around the corner.

In the chaos, several of the civilians have already scurried for the doors, but the onslaught continues. Through shattered windows,

Hitoshi can make out the dance of red-and-blue lights, the sirens, the distant thunder of helicopter blades overhead. They're surrounded, but they're not going to go down easy. It'll be a bloodbath on both sides if they don't get out, and fast.

"Hitoshi," Aizawa jerks him down. "Do you have a backup plan?"

No. "Yes." Fucking shit. He's about to *make* one. "I'm sorry."

Aizawa stiffens, then shakes his head, as though he knows what's coming. "I trust you."

His throat goes tight, as though he's about to cry. He sheds the feeling, wraps the layers of his quirk around his tongue with a determination he can nearly taste, and lets them bleed into Aizawa's mind. "Get us out of here."

In a single smooth motion, Aizawa rockets to his feet and over the counter, ducking a swing from a startled Dabi and sliding across the floor to where Kurogiri lies. Hitoshi peers over the counter just in time to see him dive for the officer holding the stun gun. He wrestles the man to the floor, rips the taser from his grasp and *tugs*, tearing the hooks free from Kurogiri's chest.

It takes only a second. Kurogiri rolls to his side, gasps and coughs and *explodes* into a black fog. The cloud swallows the room whole, slithering like a snake past each threat and wrapping its tendrils around his allies, who fold into it willingly. Casting a final glance to Aizawa, Hitoshi releases his quirk, and vaults the counter, straight into the familiar, consuming darkness.

The fog rolls back and the world regains colour. Hitoshi doesn't think he's ever been more glad to see the cold gray of concrete in his entire life.

They're on the main floor of the warehouse, where he and Toga train--a cleared-out space that makes for an easy--if painful--crash landing. He presses his face into the cold floor, takes a second to just fucking *breathe*, and finally, stands. His legs waver, the dregs of adrenaline pooling in unsteady hands and feet.

He does a slow turn, counts five, six, seven of them--*thank god*. Spinner's on his side, curled around and clutching his leg, breathing in sharp pants. Magne and Compress are bent over him, muttering low--"Let me see, let me *see* it, you're fine, see, it's not so bad--"

"Oh my god," Toga pants. She sounds winded, but *elated*, face and hands smeared in far too much blood to have come from a single source. "That was insane. Headcount!"

"Kurogiri, you good?" Dabi frowns over the man in question, extends a hand to pull him to his feet.

"You'd better be," Magne says over her shoulder, propping Spinner up. "Spin's gonna need a lift."

Hitoshi starts forward--to help, if he can, though he doesn't even begin to know how--when Shigaraki lunges, catches him with a hooked arm that slams him back against the nearby shelves. They rock back with the impact as Shigaraki pins him, breath hot and harsh against his face. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Hitoshi gasps soundlessly as a bony elbow slices into his throat. For a split second, his mind whites out to pure panic, frozen with the certainty that Shigaraki somehow saw him talking to Aizawa.

"Cocky little bastard," Shigaraki growls. "Who the fuck gave you the right to call the shots? You think you're in charge here?"

"No," he manages. "No, I'd never--"

"Tomura," Kurogiri rasps, once more on his feet. "That's enough."

Shigaraki doesn't let up. His arm twists, palm coming to rest flat against the frantic pulse of Hitoshi's neck. His fingers are like hot coals, radiating heat where they dance across the skin. He has only to close the grip. "Spinner could have been killed because of this fucking brat."

"But he wasn't, was he? It was poor timing, nothing more."

"Toshi just stepped in to stop him from killing that guy," Toga agrees.

"And what gives him the right?" Shigaraki demands. "Huh? What gives you the fucking right to tell us what to do?"

"For the love of fuck," Spinner wails. "Would somebody get this

fucking bullet out of my leg?”

“Tomura,” Kurogiri snaps, and there’s something uncharacteristically hard in the word--an undercurrent of anger, a genuine threat.

The hand lingers for another second, then releases him at last. Hitoshi stumbles, light-headed as relief and oxygen floods his lungs, and hardly has a second to stabilize before a hand cracks through the air and across his face.

“Try something like that again, I fucking dare you,” Shigaraki spits, and stalks from the room before the spots clear from Hitoshi’s eyes.

Kurogiri waits just long enough to watch him go, gaze heavy and dark, and the silence is painfully deafening.

“Well,” Compress breaks it with a tut. “How extraordinarily helpful of him.” He rips the mask from his face and flings it to the ground, pushes sweaty hair from his eyes and turns a soft look over Spinner. “Come now, friend, let’s get you to Giran. He’ll know who to call.” He and Magne lift him, drawing a groan of pain. “Kurogiri,” Compress says. “If you would.”

Kurogiri nods. His eyes pass clean through Hitoshi, once more focused. With a wave of a hand, the four of them disappear into smoke.

Hitoshi collapses back against the shelves, gripping them for dear life as he forces his knees to straighten. His eyes burn with tears from the slap, terror and relief and guilt and shock all rolled into one, packed into a neat little fist and driven straight into his face. He pries his hands from the shelves numbly, finger by finger, forces them into fists that do nothing to quell their tremors.

Toga and Dabi are the only ones left. The mirth has drained from Toga’s eyes, lips pressed tight and posture deflated as she wipes the blood from her hands down the front of her shirt. Dabi’s expression is utterly blank, eyes glued to the floor.

“Is Spinner gonna be okay?” he manages.

“He’ll be fine,” Dabi says stiltedly.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Toga says. “Shigaraki’s just mad he didn’t get to do the second part of his speech.”

“He needs to keep it the fuck together,” Dabi spits, voice low and dripping with contempt. “He loses it every time the slightest thing goes wrong. It’s a distraction at best, and a threat to the rest of us at worst.” He eyes Hitoshi, lingering where his jaw still aches.

Toga shrugs. “Yeah, but you know how he is.”

Dabi still looks unimpressed. Another day, Hitoshi might follow that through, might pick at that wound, see if there’s something there to be exploited--a lingering distrust between them. But right now, he can still feel the shiver of a hand around his neck, whispering with the stench of decay.

He presses his knuckles into his eyes, hard enough to hurt. The past ten minutes play in flashes across the dark--the terrified, bleached-white faces of the hostages, the frantic blur of the lobby dissolving into chaos. Aizawa. *God. Aizawa was there. And, I trust you.* Even after everything. *I trust you.*

He hadn’t realized how badly he’d needed to hear that.

He doesn't dare think the battle is anywhere close to over. Whatever the fallout of this latest stunt, it’s sure to be huge. But he got the note to Aizawa. Everything he knows. Everything about the bullets, about the trade, about *Eri*.

A soft touch draws his gaze back. Toga grins and pats his arm, leaving little smears of blood.

“Come on,” she says. “Let’s raid the fridge before the others get back. Spinner’s gonna be livid, and I wanna be *nice* and drunk before we have to deal with that.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you're all doing well! Leave a comment if you've got the spoons, and stay healthy out there <3

The Moral Backbone

Chapter Notes

Hello lovers and friends!

Sorry for the delay with this one. Many things were happening all at once and writing took a back seat for a while there.

Nonetheless, I hope everyone is doing well and enjoys the chapter!

I also got some gorgeous art for last chapter by the lovely Indipindy on tumblr, which you can all check out [here!](#) Please leave them some much-deserved love!

It's just like old times.

Well, maybe not *old* times. Hitoshi's only been with the League a little over a month and half, after all. But there's still something oddly nostalgic about lounging around on a ratty old sofa with Toga, both of them nursing a cocktail of unidentifiable liquor and half-melted ice, and watching the world douse the flames in the wake of the League's storm.

It's not nearly as celebratory as usual. Compress and Magne give him a wide berth when they eventually return from tending to Spinner. He pries just enough to learn Giran "knows a guy," and that according to said guy, Spinner's expected to make a full recovery. A narrow glare from Compress cuts off any follow-up questions, but Hitoshi makes a mental note to circle back to it with Kurogiri later.

Unfortunately, Kurogiri fails to make another appearance that night--having been sequestered by Shigaraki off wherever it is he goes to brood. Between the lingering tension and the bloodstains still smeared across the warehouse floor, Dabi and Twice make themselves just as scarce. That just leaves Toga, who, for her part, seems altogether unbothered by the day's losses. "What's done is done," she says, making quick work of dragging Hitoshi from the cliff's edge of his spiralling thoughts. "Between you and me? I thought you were kinda badass in there."

That night finds them together, Toga's legs sprawled in his lap, the two of them blinking heavily from the adrenaline crash and idly flipping through the same three channels, watching the frenzied news

coverage of the League's attack swirl to life. Toga's weight is like an anchor, sinking his senses back into his body. The white noise of the TV and the warmth of the drink replace the memory of gunfire and the wet splatter of blood. The gun in his hand. The chokehold of panic. Aizawa. *I trust you.*

Red and blue lights blur on the screen, a distant shot of hostages and security personnel being escorted across a street. The investigation is still underway, but the story's already a wildfire. A few of the more brazen hostages have even already given interviews, recounting the experience in harrowing detail. All the while, the screen keeps cutting back to a grainy shot from the CCTV. Particular emphasis is given to Hitoshi raising a gun to Spinner's head.

"He was like, 'We're here for a reason,'" one of the hostage quotes animatedly. "And this isn't it."

The shot changes to a news anchor, nodding thoughtfully. "Very indicative, I think, of this newer, more political angle we've seen from the League of Villains recently."

"Definitely," her colleague agrees. "As we know, the robbery was motivated by the government bailout of Origin Hero Agency--a move which earned widespread criticism from local, non-Hero law enforcement earlier this month. The League's stunt, a public declaration of protest against Origin, even appears to have been orchestrated so as to be non-lethal, with initial reports showing no casualties."

The first anchor hums. "This new shift in the League's messaging comes, of course, on the heels of their highly publicized recruitment of former UA student, Shinsou Hitoshi. During the robbery, sixteen-year-old Shinsou can be seen threatening another member of the League, in an apparent attempt to save the life of one of the bank's employees, sixty-three-year-old Fukuizumi Naoko." She turns to her colleague. "Many have lauded Shinsou's stance as what some are calling 'the League's new moral backbone.'"

Hitoshi stifles a cringe and drops his gaze to his drink. Toga gives his knee an absent-minded pat, a firm reminder of their proximity and far more of a threat than she probably intends for it to be. He breathes, and dismantles the tension within his body piece by piece. Forces his eyes back to the screen.

"Well, one thing's for certain," says the anchor, a wry twist working

the words to something halfway between praise and scorn. "Shinsou Hitoshi joined the League for a reason. And continuing their senseless campaign of terror, it seems, isn't it."

It's surprisingly easy to play it off. Shouta's a Pro, after all. No one looks twice when he tells them he was brainwashed. The security footage is of grainy, poor quality, and the brief conversation that passed between him and Hitoshi behind that teller's counter mostly obscured. *I was brainwashed*, he repeats like a mantra. *I don't remember.*

The League hasn't been aiming to kill. Only three civilians injured--two from crossfire and one from the sword Spinner had held to his throat. The deadliest part of the whole encounter was probably Hitoshi's reaction. Shouta doesn't know whether it was lack of skill or of conviction that stopped Hitoshi from pulling the trigger, whether it was a bluff, or--worse yet--if he'd actually *meant* it. But in all his years of Pro work he doesn't think he's ever seen anything so utterly reckless and impulsive.

The problem is how smart it was. The problem is that it *worked*.

Shouta knew in that instant, Hitoshi wasn't going to come back, not without a fight. Shouta could have given him that fight, could have tried to stop him. It a huge risk to the kid's cover, not to mention a blow to his confidence--but he could have done it. He should have. No question. The fact that he didn't might be a mistake he'll have to live with for the rest of his life.

Or, it might have been the right choice.

I can get more. I can do more. His life in the balance, a battlefield raining with bullets, and Hitoshi had begged Shouta to let him *do more*.

"Fucking shit," Shouta hisses, digging knuckles into his bruised eyes. It's a little after midnight, and he's only just managed to slip away from the detectives and reporters clamouring for statements. His apartment is blissfully silent in the aftermath, nothing but the hazy glow of the muted TV in the background and the distant sounds of nightlife from the streets below. A crumpled note sits on the kitchen

table, carefully smoothed out.

A string of names and dates, locations and recruitment tactics, trade deals and associates. A little girl's name. Eri. *They're using her quirk to engineer weapons.* The very same weapon that took Tsukauchi down, he'd bet his life on it. *She needs you more than I do.*

"Fucking *shit*," he repeats. "I *know*."

Because Hitoshi's *right*. He made it. He's *in*. If the League trusts him enough to include him on something as delicate and dangerous as the stunt they just pulled, there can't possibly be any question of his loyalties. They *clearly* think of him as one of their own. And Hitoshi's more than proved it--he's fully capable of playing both sides. Shouta remembers the League's recent video, Hitoshi's voice cold with hatred, dripping with contempt. *The so-called heroes never cared about me.*

Even knowing everything he does, Shouta had nearly fallen for the act, had nearly thought it sincere. And then seeing Hitoshi in person--he doesn't know what he'd been expecting. For the kid to break down, crack under the stress and the fear and the deadly weight of the role he's been playing these past weeks.

But he'd been *fine*. Exactly as stupidly determined and steadfast as Shouta remembers. He hadn't so much as shown a flicker of fear at the prospect of going back. *You have to let me do more.*

Hitoshi saved a man's life. And that isn't something Shouta's soon to forget. Hitoshi did his job.

Now it's time Shouta does his.

He sighs, exhausted and heartfelt, and fixes weary eyes on the smudged ink of the name before him. *Eri*.

Tsukauchi's back at the station by the weekend, albeit arm in a sling and confined to desk duty. "The sling's just for show, actually," he declares, and wiggles his fingers in demonstration. "You see that range of motion? I'm basically unstoppable."

Shouta tosses a pen and watches it ricochet off the sling and under a

desk, never to be seen again. “Unstoppable,” he agrees blandly.

The test results came back a few days ago, and their initial fears were proven right. Tsukauchi’s quirk factor isn’t just broken, it’s *gone*. As though it was never there at all.

And if that blow weren’t enough, they’ve still got nothing from Honda. Fuck. *Yasujima*. He has *got* to stop forgetting that. The raid on his apartment, while revealing the jankiest homemade meth lab this side of the hemisphere, turned out not to be the source of the quirk reversal drug. While the meth alone’s plenty enough to put the bastard away for a good decade or so, unless they can get him to snitch on his supplier, they’re still shit out of luck.

For that, they have the Eight Precepts to thank--a fact Shouta knows only thanks to Shinsou, and which he’s reluctant to share until he can back it up with something less incriminating than, *My anonymous source said so*. He can only keep using that excuse for so long. Sooner or later, Tsukauchi’s going to throttle it out of him, sling or not.

In addition, the bastards are doing it through some sort of human experimentation. *A little girl*, Hitoshi had said, and Shouta has to bite back the rage that threatens to flood him. They’re experimenting on a *little girl*.

“How’s the Yasujima interrogation going?” he asks, instead of breaking something.

“Oh, ol’ Honda?” Tsukauchi grins as though the name is still funny. It very much is not. “I met with the public prosecutor this morning. She says we should have no problem extending his detention.”

“Any word yet on the supplier?”

“Not a peep. We’ve dangled all the goodies too. Reduced sentence, possible parole.” Tsukauchi’s mouth gives an unhappy twist. “He’s stubborn, I’ll give him that.”

Stubborn, but not stupid. There’s no question he’ll be put away on the drug charges, whether he talks or not. Better to hold his tongue and save face in prison than bargain for a shorter sentence only to get shot dead in the street the moment he’s released.

God, what he wouldn’t give for a quirk like Hitoshi’s right now. A single word, and he could have Yasujima spilling his guts. Any Pro agency would be lucky to have someone like that on their team.

Shouta could almost laugh at the irony. Just when you need him, the kid up and turns into a villain.

Then again, that might make for an useful strategy in itself.

“Yeesh,” Tsukauchi shudders. “Your *I-have-an-idea* face is terrifying, you know that?”

“You still got those files on the leads my anonymous tip got us?”

Tsukauchi raises an eyebrow. “Yes?”

He grins. And if it looks even more terrifying, well, sue him. “What are the odds you could get me fifteen minutes alone with our old friend Honda?”

The interrogation room is perfectly bland. Beige furniture and gray walls, a two-way mirror across the room behind which a curious Tsukauchi-- *This better be good, Eraser* --stands hidden. The steady click of the clock above the door is perfectly maddening, the gleam of the overhead lights nearly blinding.

Yasujima Koitaru sits at the table, hands cuffed and head bowed. He’s grown an impressive beard and some less impressive dark circles in his week of detention, but a familiar fire flares to life behind his eyes as Shouta strodes in, a thick stack of files under one arm.

So the fucker remembers him. Good.

Shouta stands across the table, and levels a long, impassive stare. He slaps the first file down, image up.

“Bubaigawara Jin,” he says. “Alias: Twice. Born May 10, 2009, at Koseikai Takeda Hospital, where he returned 23 years later after suffering a violent psychotic break. He’s been with the League a little over a year now, and ran drugs out of Kyoto before then. Two murders, four cases of aggravated assault, eight counts of larceny, and one for criminal dismemberment of a corpse.” He rolls the words off his tongue, feeling the shape of every syllable. Pauses, just enough for the words to sink in, and drawls on. “Quirk: double. Allows him to create a copy of anything--organic or inorganic--through touch, so

long as he knows the target's precise physical measurements. He excels in support and distraction. Among the obvious uses of filling their ranks with disposable fodder, the League likes to use him for deception tactics--confusing the enemy, giving them the run-around. He's also, apparently, quite the comedian."

Yasujima's eyes narrow. He opens his mouth, but Shouta tosses another file down first.

"Sako Atsuhiko. Alias: Mr Compress--just Compress to his friends. Born January 24, 2001. A worldly fellow, this one. Did you know he was a jewel thief? Worked for hire, all across Europe. You wouldn't believe the shit he smuggled into Hungary--now *that's* a story. And before that, a stage actor in America. Last known residence: 818 Ashton Road, Philadelphia. Left behind a wife and--" he checks the file, "--a six-year-old son."

There's another pause. He flips the page, draws a finger down the nearly 500-word description of Compress' quirk, then covers it by slapping down a third file. "Iguchi Suichi, also known as Spinner." A fourth. "Hikiishi Kenji, also known as Magne."

This time, he waits, lets the confusion crystalize as Yasukima's eyes flicker across the spread of names and faces.

"Thorough, huh?" he says. "And that's just the first few. We've also got a file twice that size on Shigaraki Tomura. Ever met him? How about--" Another file hits the table, cold eyes staring blankly at the camera. "Shinsou Hitoshi?"

Yasujima huffs a single laugh and rolls his eyes. Shouta takes this as his cue to sit, and leans back, arms crossed. "I know. Who cares, right? You weren't with the League anyway. You were with the Eight Precepts. Though," he taps his chin, "from the looks of that trade you botched, you guys were starting to branch out, huh? Expanding your business. That's smart, when you've got such a good product. Bet the League was willing to pay big for it. Bet your guys spent a long time negotiating it." He smiles, slow and sly, and spreads his hands over the table. "You wanna know how we got all this information on the League? It's a long story, but I'll cut to the good part for you. We have an in. A traitor."

"Right," Yasujima drawls. "I'm sure."

"Don't believe me?" Shouta smacks another file across the table, sending the rest of the pages fluttering. "Toga Himiko. Born August 7,

2024. Attended Yamato Girl's Academy in Tokyo, but dropped out in her final year. Wanted for the murder of her step-father and two younger sisters, one of whom she successfully impersonated for nearly three weeks after her death. Her quirk allows her to temporarily transform her appearance into that of anyone whose blood she has ingested." He sucks in a long, ragged breath, and finishes with a bland, "Any amount will do, but a cup gives her about twenty-four hours."

There's no snarky response this time. Yasujima eyes the files like they might divulge to him the secret of their origin.

"So. Any guesses at the leak? I'll give you a hint. He's managed to gather all that in a little over a *month*."

Yasujima's eyes flicker down to Hitoshi's picture, still upright next to Toga's.

"I wonder," Shouta taunts, slowly. "How long do you think it'll take him to dig into the Precepts, now that you guys are so cozy with the League?"

"Bullshit. The kid betrayed you fuckers. Everyone saw it."

He nearly laughs. "I know, right? It's the perfect cover. A nice, *public* betrayal. A real hit to UA's morale. No one would ever suspect we'd planned it all along."

"I'm not an idiot," Yasujima spits. "There's no way you'd be desperate enough to hand over a *kid* to the League of Villains."

Shouta shoots across the table, until they're nearly nose to nose. "You have no *idea* the lengths we'd go to wipe scum like you off the face of the planet. So let me ask you again, Yasujima, how long do you think before he manages to get the information you've so proudly withheld from us? How long before your use here is rendered obsolete, and we no longer feel like being kind enough to offer you the reduced sentence? Because let me tell you, I trained the kid for this very mission, and I really don't think it's gonna take all that long."

He holds the silence, this time. Lets them both sit in it. Lets the war wage behind Yasujima's eyes. Finally, he leans back, and with as much indifference as physically possible, says, "Tell me about the bullets, Yasujima. Make everyone's life a little easier."

He wavers, throat working silently, eyes flitting from picture to picture. The League of Villains stares silently back. Yasujima spits. "Go

fuck yourself.”

Shouta sighs, disappointment bleeding out. His eyes ponder the ceiling. Well. It was worth a shot. “Fine by me,” he shrugs. “I never liked playing nice with child abusers anyway.”

Yasujima goes rigid, but Shouta’s already up. He sweeps the files back into his arms, slides Hitoshi back into place among the League, and turns purposefully towards the door.

“Wait. Fucking-- okay, okay, just wait.”

Shouta pauses. Hope blooms behind his ribcage, and he has to school his face before he turns back.

“I wanna be protected if I’m gonna talk. Solitary,” Yasujima says. “And don’t think I’m not getting that sentence reduced.”

Shouta nods. “I can make that happen.”

Yasujima scowls, eyes low, fists clenched. It’d make a pitiful sight, if Shouta had an the energy to give a single fuck.

“What do you want to know?”

“Let’s start easy,” he says. “Tell me where they’re keeping the girl.”

“I’m going to kill you,” Tsukauchi tells him, the second the door closes. “You absolute bastard. You couldn’t possibly have made all that up.”

Shouta shrugs. “It was a logical ruse.”

“My ass.” Tsukauchi aims a punch at his shoulder, which Shouta easily dodges. “I might not be a human lie detector anymore, but I’m not a moron.” He shakes his head, stunned. “So *that’s* been your *anonymous tip* this whole time?”

“I’ll explain, I swear. Just-- not now, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Tsukauchi drawls. “You heroes and your damn *secrets* .”

He shakes his head. “We’ve got something bigger to worry about right now anyway.”

Tsukauchi groans. “I can’t believe you’re about to raid a yakuza den and I’m stuck on *desk duty*. ”

“Not just a raid,” Shouta says. “A rescue mission.”

Making a Difference

Chapter Notes

Hello!

I hope everyone is keeping well. Please forgive this short chapter while I get back into the swing of things. Thank you all for your patience with the (nearly year-long aaaahhhhh) wait. I cannot promise when the next chapter will be, but know that I am very excited for it.

I appreciate each and every one of you who have stuck around or are just starting this journey.

The Eight Precepts' compound is a twisting labyrinth of halls punctuated with cracked concrete and rusted steel, and by the time the infiltration team clears out, most of it has been reduced to smoking wreckage. Almost every room is windowless, shadows long under flickering lights, almost comical for how stereotypically *villainous* it all is, damp and cool in the way only deep underground can be.

Still, Shouta's eyes ache like he's been staring into the fucking sun. He hasn't blinked in nearly twenty minutes.

"All clear on the main floor," comes a voice through the comms.

"Reporters starting to gather on the street," Ryuku reports. *"Takagi, keep them clear until we've got the armoured one off-site. His quirk was nasty. I don't want him anywhere near civilians."*

It was a hard won fight, and not without its losses either. Shouta didn't catch half of what was going down on the lower levels, occupied as he was with his current guardianship. He knows Mirio Togata took a hit. He knows Nighteye took one worse.

"Evac's here with the quirk-subduing cuffs. Gonna use the tranqs on the big guy too, just to be safe." Good, Shouta thinks off-handed. That's good. The Eight Precepts had some skilled members among their ranks. The kind it would take an army to detain. An army, or a handful of desperate pros.

"Eraser, you good to play backup at the station?"

His name rips him from his thoughts, eyes aching and wide open. But the trembling figure in his arms clings tighter, tiny hands fisted in his shirt. And he *saw* what those hands could do.

“Can’t,” he says back, and continues to stare at the girl. Eri. Her name is Eri. “I need to get the kid out of here.”

She’s quiet in her fear. Shaking like a leaf, and hardly a whimper out of her. Her fingers are blistered and scabbed, the skin of her wrists red where the bandages have begun to unravel. Puncture marks litter the skin over the stark blue of her veins. Must hurt like hell, and still not a single sound. Overhaul must have drilled that silence into her the same way he’d driven those needles into her arms.

“Paramedics heading down to meet you now, Eraser.”

“Thanks,” he murmurs back. “Eraser out.” He shuts the comms off, stuffs the earpiece in his pocket before carefully returning to his hold around her shoulders. She glances up at the movement. He smiles - aims for soothing and probably misses by a mile. “Some friends of mine are going to come join us in a second, okay? They’re going to help you.”

She snuffles, burrows tighter into his chest.

“I’m not gonna leave.”

“You *can’t*, ” comes her trembling voice.

“I won’t,” he promises, and readjusts his hold, tries gently to pry her hands away

“No, no, you can’t. I’ll hurt them, I’ll--”

“Eri.” He stills her, feels the fine tremors beneath her skin. “I’m not going to leave. I’m not going to let you hurt anyone.”

It’s another few minutes before the paramedics arrive, and another few after that before Eri can be coaxed into letting them touch her. Shouta keeps a hand on her shoulder the whole time, and brushes them off when they turn their attention towards him. He’s tired and sore and in desperate need of eyedrops, but he’s made it out better than most. He fumbles through his pockets one-handed, shakes out his drops and dumps about half the bottle into his eyes while Eri’s distracted.

She'll need to be assessed by a professional before an official diagnosis can be made, but her quirk can't possibly be as powerful as she fears. It's obviously amplified by fear or stress, by whatever lies Overhaul fed her to keep her docile, but her well has to dry out sooner or later. It seems just having him around has helped considerably--the horn on her head so dim now he almost wouldn't notice it in the mats of her hair. It will take time for her to unlearn her fear, to replace it with a healthy caution and control. But they got her out. She's safe. The rest can come later.

He carries her up to street level, where the paramedics steer them both in the direction of an ambulance. "We can take her from here, sir."

"I go where she goes," he says. "It's a matter of safety. For everyone."

The paramedics share a look. "She needs to see a doctor."

"Okay, Eri, can you tell me if this hurts?"

Haru looks the picture of professional in her white coat and latex gloves, but her soft voice betrays nothing but fondness for the child in front of her. The room's awash in a warm glow of a setting sun, the steady beep of Eri's heart rate, and the faint smell of detergent from the gown that now covers her skin. Eri seemed fascinated with it at first, the crinkle of the tissue-thin fabric, hands dancing over it like she'd never felt anything so soft.

Muffled footsteps and voices circle the room, but they seem far away for the moment, inconsequential. Through the fogged glass of the door, the stiff outlines of two security officers stand like spectres. They were supposed to be posted in the room with them, but Haru had kicked out with a glare that rivaled Shouta's own. He'd thought she would do the same to him at first, but she'd seemed content to let him stand at the end of the bed.

She's got one of Eri's hands in her own, pressing into her nailbeds, watching the colour drain away. "Can you feel this?"

Eri nods.

“Good. And can you wiggle them, stretch them nice and big for me? Does that hurt?”

Eri curls and flexes her fingers. The skin looks cracked and dry where it isn't covered in open scabs. “A little.”

Haru frowns. “Okay, we're gonna clean up those cuts and get you some new bandages. We'll see if that helps.” She glides to a cabinet and ruffles through a stand of swabs and salves. “Do you want the bumblebees or the butterflies?”

There's a pause. Eri glances to Shouta, back to Haru. “Um.”

Haru emerges with two sets of bandages and holds them out for inspection. “Have you ever seen a butterfly before?”

They continue like this, Haru narrating each step-- *“This might feel cold,”* --and gauging each reaction-- *“I know, it smells funny. But I promise it's gonna help you feel better.”* Shouta doesn't know if it's her quirk at work or if she's just that good, but not long after, Eri's coaxed down a sedative and settled back into the pillows.

Haru dims the lights and pulls the curtain shut around the bed. “She should be fine for a few hours,” she whispers. “If you need to be elsewhere.”

He nods, but neglects the easy out. “I need to stay on site.”

“Right.”

“Yeah.”

She shifts, looks away. “All the same. It'll be at least a day before the labs have anything on the blood samples, so--”

“I thought you were on stress leave.”

She grimaces. “Forced them to take me back. Wasn't helping much, sitting around, worrying. I'd rather the distraction.”

Shouta knows the feeling. “I'm grateful,” he says. “You're very good with kids.”

She gives him a look. “So are you.” Then, “No family?”

“None we'd want here.”

“You said she was... experimented on?”

“They were able to engineer weapons from her quirk.”

“It's that powerful?”

Shouta nods. “I’ve seen it in action. She’s--” he tastes the word *dangerous*, but bites it back. *Like he was just a loaded gun waiting to go off.* “I should be here, when she wakes up. Just in case.”

Haru offers a tired smile. “Then I suppose it’s about to be a long night for the both of us.”

Shouta’s chest clenches. God. It would be so easy for her to hate him, to make this miserable for him. “It was Hitoshi, who gave me the tip. About her. At the bank. He was able to-- We had a moment together.”

Haru gives him a sharp look. She’s seen the news, of course. But-- “You talked to him?”

Shouta nods, and finds his next words carefully. “It wasn’t long. He had an out, but he didn’t... I couldn’t *make* him take it.”

“Oh,” she says, stunned. Then again, voice wavering. “Oh. No, he wouldn’t have, would he?” She lifts a hand, covers her eyes. Laughs a little, broken.

“I’m sorry,” Shouta says. “I’m not-- I’m not trying to say his safety matters less than Eri’s, or anyone else’s. Just--” He doesn’t even know *what* he’s trying to say. “Just that--” Just that there’s an empty bunker across town, covered in debris and police tape, where no more weapons will ever be made, where no more people will ever be hurt. Just that there’s a little girl sleeping not ten feet away, comfortable and warm and *safe*, for possibly the first time in her short life. “He’s good,” Shouta settles on, because he doesn’t have the words for the rest of it. “You can see that, right? He’s doing good. He’s making a difference.”

Haru glances back to the bed where Eri lies, face smoothed of pain for the first time in the hours since either of them have seen her.

“Of course I do,” Haru says.

It's a cold, howling December evening, in the rattling, rusted hull of a semi-abandoned warehouse teeming with criminals and terrorists, when Hitoshi excuses himself to the restroom and very carefully performs the world's quietest victory dance.

Giran had arrived out of a portal earlier that night, with all the sullen air of a military officer about to issue a death notice, and gathered the League to inform them of the takedown of the Eight Precepts

According to his informants, they'd had the Precepts surrounded in minutes--a full fledged assault by an astounding number of joint Pro and special op forces. Whoever had helmed it, Giran said, was extremely cautious in their preparations. The Precepts hadn't had a clue what was coming.

"We're looking at a capture count of about fifteen," he declared. "Which means it's not a question of *if* someone talks, but when."

"But we're not in trouble, are we?" Compress asked.

Kurogiri shook his head. "Our business ventures together were limited, thankfully. I'd only transported them here for talks once. We're in little danger of them giving up our location, except for perhaps a descriptor of the one room they were in."

Even with the knowledge of safety from imminent threat, the League's high spirits plummeted in the wake of this revelation. It's quickly decided that sleeping arrangements will have to change to rotating shifts, a perimeter watch established and a sort of buddy-system adopted, on the off-chance another quick getaway is needed.

On that note, Hitoshi's extended visit to the bathroom is probably already too long - it was all he could do not to have Toga follow him into the stall. But his pulse is racing, a cold sweat making his hairs stand on end. A smile threatens to crack over his face.

Eri's safe. Nothing else matters right now. She's safe because of *him*. And no one suspects a thing. He feels invincible, suddenly, giddy and nearly drunk with it.

Weeks of worrying, weighing and rehearsing his every step, his script--still somehow not being ready for it, the violent light and pulse-pounding sound, the horrified faces and screams--and afterwards, when it was done, the sleepless nights spent with the memory of a gun in his hand and Shigaraki's hot breath on his face. After *all that* , finally, like a pillar of light, he can see it now - what it was worth,

what it accomplished.

A life saved. A concrete, inexorable example of the good he's done, the good he can do. The difference he's making, the hero he can be.

In the Dark

Chapter Notes

Another short chapter, yes, but more importantly - it didn't take me a year to post. I call that a win.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The news of the raid on the Eight Precepts hits the media with the force of a bullet-train the next morning, and it's all anyone can talk about. There's only mention of Eri, from what Hitoshi sees, and he's glad for that. Hopefully, with time and privacy, she'll have a smooth recovery ahead. It's the least she deserves, and the most he can afford to think about it.

Hitoshi catalogues the names and faces credited with the operation. It's no surprise that Eraserhead's hardly featured. Hitoshi knows Aizawa prefers it that way, and, weirdly, he does too. It strikes an odd sense of solidarity - the two of them, all of the work and none of the fame. The burden of the underground hero. Hitoshi thinks he could get used to it.

He keeps his head low the following days. They've got Spinner on some serious painkillers for his leg, and it's made him even worse of a dick than usual. That, coupled with the newly tightened quarters they're all keeping, makes a minefield of the common areas. Worse still is the effect it seems to be having on Shigaraki. Hitoshi sees more of him in those few days than he has since the beginning of this whole thing.

Part of him is curious, dying to test the waters. He's interacted so little with Shigaraki--or even seen him interact with the others--he's sure there must be some undercurrent of tension to be extorted.

But the other, smarter part of him would much rather keep his head. Spinner's already pissed, and Shigaraki obviously hasn't forgiven Hitoshi for so much as drawing breath, let alone what he pulled in the bank. That's two more enemies than he can afford to have. In the end, he keeps quiet, and lets everyone find their footing around him.

It isn't hard to do. Business at the warehouse slows to a veritable crawl. Giran doesn't pay any more visits, and Shigaraki's bad mood has Kurogiri running around at his beck and call at all hours. Hitoshi

resorts to the safety of habit, and spends most of his time lounging around or sparring with Toga. He even weasles his way into a few short-lived matches against Dabi, who, while less entertaining, at least doesn't revel in his defeat the way Toga does.

Late one night, Hitoshi catches the date on the corner of a TV screen, watches calmly as midnight flickers by, and realizes it's a week until the start of winter break. Come Friday, he'll have been a villain for exactly two months. The thought is both exhilarating and strangely sobering.

He sleeps in his prescribed shift, eats the food offered, parrots the mantras spouted, accepts what he's given and asks for nothing more. It doesn't feel like stalling, it doesn't even feel like work. It feels like life, like progress, like the edge of some great revelation, like nothing at all. It feels like he's only just getting started.

The following day, breakfast is a sorry mix of stale rice and canned coffee. A few half-hearted complaints make their rounds, but no one has the courage to genuinely pester Kurogiri about it. The man's exhausted - all creased suit and blurred edges, the glow of his eyes unusually dim. He's been playing fetch for Shigaraki and Giran as they navigate their new vulnerabilities. The ball's still in the air with regards to what their next big move is going to be, that much Hitoshi knows, but it isn't until he hears mention of 'clearing out some of the old places' that he realizes what this could mean.

"What, like the safehouse in Akasaka?" Magne says, and a collective grown goes up around the table.

"That's one possibility," Kurogiri says.

"I thought Giran said we didn't need to relocate!"

"We don't, for now. But this was never meant to be a permanent solution."

"The other places all reek of piss and homeless people."

Kurogiri twitches. "I agree, it's less than ideal, but we can't exactly go back to the hotel, can we?" He sighs and softens his voice. "I want

nothing less than to take another home from you. Any of you. But this place isn't fit for long-term housing. Besides, we've lost two bases in under a year. By being proactive, and exploring our other avenues, we can mitigate any such potential losses in the future."

Magne huffs. "I'm *not* going on a cleaning spree of that dump just to 'explore other avenues.'"

Hitoshi spots his opening. "I can do it."

Several heads turn his way. He lets them. "If this other place just needs to be cleaned out, I can do it." He shrugs, then grins, nonchalant. "Or, I can *make* you all do it. A couple of words and you'll be the deadliest group of vigilante janitors this town has ever seen."

To no one's surprise, they don't take him up on the second offer. But they *do* give in to the first. Filthy or not, he's thrilled to get a look at another one of their other potential hideouts. And if it means getting away from Shigaraki and Spinner, all the better. Besides, he thinks, he's done his fair share of freshening up linens back when he used to volunteer at Saitama General. No big deal.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

For one, there are no linens. Just a colony of cobwebs and a couple of threadbare, moth-eaten futons tucked in the corners of various empty and otherwise trash-littered rooms.

Worse than the state of the house is the fact that he's not alone in it. They send Twice with him, citing his ability to generate a surplus of manual labour.

The man in question seems to take this as more a suggestion. He spends the first five minutes doing handstands on various pieces of rotted furniture, before eventually emerging from some corner of the house with a can of beans that doesn't look to have seen daylight in years.

"Aha!" he announces. "A discovery!"

Hitoshi leaves him to it, wandering from room to room as he maps the

layout in his head. Two main floors and a cellar--walls of exposed insulation and concrete floors. Running water but no electricity. It could fit a group their size, but it wouldn't be comfortable. By the time he's circled back to Twice, he appears to have given up on his hunt for a can-opener, and is now attempting to crack the beans open against the corner of a table.

"Watch it, asshole, you're gonna break it," one of his double snaps.

"So? It's a piece of shit anyway. And I'm starving."

"No, you're not. I made you like five minutes ago!"

"No, idiot, I made *you*!"

Hitoshi--who has long since given up attempting to tell Twice apart from his creations--ignores the spat with practiced ease. He refocuses on the task at hand - armed with rubber gloves and industrial trash bags courtesy of Kurogiri. He fills two bags with the litter and refuse, the sound of Twice's existential crisis like background music, before the bickering grows heated enough to steal back his attention.

The two men circle each other like wolves. Hitoshi scurries out of the crossfire, but lingers in the doorway to watch, genuinely curious. He's not seen much of Twice's combat abilities yet.

The fight is tremendously short-lived. A few quick jabs and one gets the other in a headlock. Seconds later, what must be the real Twice straightens, the other already melting into a puddle of indistinguishable fluid.

"Ugh," he dusts himself off. "All that for a can of beans." He shudders, stiffens, and his skin begins to *stretch*, peeling away from his core until it forms two more bodies of equal height and size. "You two," he snaps his fingers, "get to work!"

Hitoshi creeps forward and eyes the puddle with purely scientific interest. "Doesn't it use more energy to create new doubles than to just control the old ones?"

Twice shrugs. "I don't control them, kid. Not really. They're people like you and me, with minds of their own."

"Then... you just killed a man?"

Twice shakes with laughter. "You're overthinking it."

“You really can’t control them? See through their eyes? Read their minds?”

“Nope. I can usually feel when one of them kicks it, but that’s about it. Hell, they could be plotting my death right now for all I know.” He grins, and gestures to the puddle. “Course, a simple snap and they end up like their dear old brother over here, so it evens out.”

“Huh,” Hitoshi puts a pin in that information. “Cool.”

“This place fucking *reeks*,” one of the doubles swears. That, at least, they can all agree on.

Hitoshi returns to his task, forces himself to work a couple minutes more before eventually drifting towards the window. He takes in the view. A drab, narrow street. Cracked pavement, littered with trash. Akasaka isn’t a district he’s familiar with, except by name. In the cold, wintery light of day, it’s perfectly forgettable.

“All quiet on the western front?” one of the doubles says over his shoulder.

Hitoshi carefully masks any guilt at having been caught snooping. Nothing suspicious about looking out a window. “Neighbours don’t seem too nosey.”

“Nah, they’re mostly squatters.”

“Are they all like this? The other safehouses?”

The double shrugs. “Some are nicer than others. They all start to look the same after a while.”

“How many do we have?” He’d tried this angle once, all those weeks ago, with Kurogiri. It hadn’t gone far, and Hitoshi hadn’t wanted to press his luck then. But Twice is more talkative, and Hitoshi not nearly so timid.

“No idea. Kurogiri probably has a list somewhere.” The double waves a hand. “Says it’s better that way - all of us half in the dark. That way, if one of us goes down, we’re not at risk of losing everything.”

“Sure,” Hitoshi says. “But isn’t this a little... out in the open?” He gestures to the windows.

“It’s not all secret labs and underground bunkers, kid,” the double

grins. "Sometimes hiding in plain sight is the best option. I mean, maybe not for poor bastards like you, with all the notoriety. But lots of us can get away with it. Compress never lets the heroes see him without the mask. Toga has a whole rotation of disguises, obviously. And, you know, the girl."

Hitoshi frowns. "Who?"

"The UA girl."

Hitoshi goes utterly, perfectly still. Like a coin slotted into a machine, something *clicks*, tumbles loose, settles like lead in the pit of his stomach.

"They usually use places like this to meet her, anyway," Twice continues, oblivious, words nearly lost in the roar of Hitoshi's pulse. Twice knows. Twice fucking *knows*. How could he have been so stupid, so *blind*, to never even consider--

No. Not the time. Focus. He schools his face. Shoulders loose, relaxed. "Twice," he forces his voice out even, slow, the careful upward tick of inflection betraying his confusion, his perfect innocence. "What are you talking about?"

There's a pause. Three identical heads turn to stare. "Ah, shit," the nearest double rubs his head. "You didn't know, huh?"

Hitoshi feels his lips twitch. "Half in the dark."

"Don't feel bad, okay? Plenty of us didn't know for the longest time either."

A deflection. Hitoshi catches it mid-air, pivots it back. "So, there's... There's someone else like me?"

Twice wavers, and Hitoshi sees the moment the guilt breaks him. "Ugh, Shigaraki's gonna kill me. Alright, look, don't tell them I've told you but... Yeah, we have an ally, on the inside."

"In UA?"

"Yeah." Twice's eyes pop in his head. "Oh, hey, you might even know her!"

Hitoshi can hardly breathe, pulled taut like a wire through his spine, electric and taunting, and so, so close. "Who is it?"

And Twice tells him.

Chapter End Notes

Now accepting final calls on Traitor Identity.

Interlude: Winter Break

Chapter Notes

Next few chapters are undergoing some cosmetic surgery while I make some last minute changes to the order of a few scenes. Bear with me if some (like this) are shorter than others - we must all make sacrifices for the sake of Flow™

Thank you for all the wonderful comments. I have not yet the spoons to answer each individually but please know that I read them all with a huge smile on my face. I always love hearing your reactions and predictions.

On with the show!

The hum of anxiety hangs in the air like a bad smell, permeated only by the scratch of pencils and students shifting in their seats. This may be the quietest Ochako's ever heard her classmates be. End of term exams have brought an unfamiliar gravity to 1-A - she can see it in the furrowed brows and hunched shoulders and desks littered with eraser sheddings and crumpled paper. The semester's been brutal. But then, when is anything ever easy for them? She's only just finished her essay, too exhausted for anything more than a cursory final check for spelling and grammar before she made the long trudge to the front of the class to hand it in to Kayama. She's not the first to finish - Iida, Bakugou, and Yaoyorozu beat her to it, already slouched back in varying degrees of relief, waiting to be dismissed.

Iida offers her the customary wave and waggled eyebrows on her way back to her seat, which she parrots - a private celebration between them. She tries to catch Midoriya's eye, but he's got his head bent low, forehead nearly kissing the desk and pen scrawling so fast she swears he must be using his quirk.

Tsu glances up, flashes a raised palm in an obvious - *five more minutes*. Ochako brushes it away, mouths, *Take your time!* - but a tut from Kayama cuts off any more covert communication.

She retreats to her desk, stomach tight with anticipation . They've still technically got one more period after this, but she and Tsu are excused for the rest of the afternoon on account of their upcoming interviews with Dragon Hero Ryuku.

The thought sends a flutter of excitement through her. Most of 1-A are supposed to be working on their internship applications over the break, but she and a few lucky others have already been scouted. In her and Tsu's case, they were recommended to the agency personally by upper-classmen Hado Nejire, so she knows there are already high expectations. There's still no guarantee that the placement will work out - they still have to interview first, after all. But Ochako's got a good feeling about this. It's about time they catch a break, after everything she and Tsu have been through this semester.

It's not technically a work-studies program, since they don't have their provisional licenses yet. Ochako smiles ruefully at that, remembering how well she was doing before the License Exams got cut short. What a disaster that day was. Still, while the placement might not count for academic credits, any position in an agency is sure to look great on a resume. Not to mention the exposure, training, and experience it will provide - each bringing her one step closer to the real thing.

True to her word, Tsu finishes her essay a few minutes later, and all but skips to the front to turn it in. She pauses at Kayama's desk, a few whispered words exchanged between them, before Tsu gestures back to Ochako. Kayama looks between them, nods, and juts her chin to the door in dismissal.

Ochako springs to her feet so fast her chair clatters against the desk behind her. Red-faced, she bows and excuses herself, shuffling through the aisles once more to curious stares.

Tsu stifles her giggles long enough to make it into the hallway.

Ochako smacks her arm. "Don't say a word!"

They all but sprint to their lockers, trading out school bags for hero uniforms, half-stumbling in their excitement. Tsu ropes her hair back into tight loops. Ochako cycles through a round of warm-up stretches. They both stare at each other.

"What are we doing?" Ochako breaks first, nervous laughter bubbling forth. It's just an *interview*. "It's not like we're gonna fight."

"Sure we aren't," Tsu drawls. "We never do."

Ochako shakes her head. "Should we find Hado?"

"I think she's already there. Sensei said he'd take us to meet her."

Gravity settles back around her shoulders at the reminder - the fact that they have to be escorted every step of the way. It's no wonder that everyone's on edge about their outing. 1-A students don't exactly have the best track record for avoiding trouble.

Not just 1-A students, she corrects, as she glances through a window towards the main gates - newly rebuilt after they'd been blown open not two months ago.

Smoke and dust and gnawing worry, then shock, then outrage. She swallows the anger of the memory, lets it well up as determination instead. For every villain hidden among them, there's a hero in the making. That's what she's here for, after all.

1-A is empty but for Aizawa, cocooned in his sleeping bag with paperwork sprawled across his desk like a mosaic. He glances up as they enter, eyes narrowed before they fall to the clock and he seems to remember himself. He stands, joints cracking audibly. He still bears the fading remnants of two black eyes--the reason for which he staunchly refused to disclose, despite Kirishima's endless needling--but he fixes them both with a grave look. "Ready?"

Their walk to the shuttle is quiet. Ochako watches her companions from the corner of her eye, wondering if Tsu's as nervous as she is. She hopes so, then feels bad for thinking it.

Aizawa comes to a stop at the main gates, squinting in the sun, gaze lingering where Ochako's did not long ago. His breath clouds in the cold.

"Ryuku's as clever as she is tough. Her quirk is incredible but her size and strength can do a lot of damage in tight quarters. She'll be counting on you to mitigate that. You're both capable of more precise maneuverability. Use that lighter touch to your advantage," he says, voice clipped and matter-of-fact. "Hado's the same, but she's got a stronger frontal attack. With either of them on your side in a fight, you'll wanna stick to flanking. Run the perimeter and control the terrain. Focus on getting civilians out and keeping enemies in." He drops his eyes to the two of them. "Not that you'll be doing any fighting, of course."

Ochako trades a look with Tsu - sees mirrored in her the same fierce determination. Aizawa must see it too. He blinks, and something smooths open in his face - a small, rare smile. He clasps them each on the shoulder, rough and warm. "You're gonna do great."

Ryuku is surprisingly calm, voice gentle and feminine, in perfect contrast to the enormous power summering beneath her skin. The office is bright and bustling with activity, interns and temps running from ringing phones to flashing computer monitors - the thumb on the pulse of the city's streets. Ochako thinks she spots Hado a few times, flashing them encouraging winks and thumbs up from somewhere within the throng.

She hardly remembers the interview afterwards, still buzzing with leftover adrenaline and nerves, but it must go well, because sure enough, she and Tsu spend the rest of the afternoon memorizing patrol routes and organizing schedules. Fifteen hours a week - evenings and weekends.

"Are either of you going home for the holidays?" Ryuku asks, and Ochako shakes her head.

"My parents live in the city anyway. I'm happy to pick up any extra shifts."

And so she does - the next week a blur of racing from lessons to patrol shifts to the dorms and back again. Homework piles up behind the grueling hours, and her sleep schedule's shot to hell and back, but it's worth it just to see the looks on her classmates' faces every afternoon when she shoots out the door after Hado.

Exams trickle to a close and winter break rolls in to clear skies, a long overdue break from the snow clouds and misery of the past few weeks. Before she knows, it the dorm halls are littered with bulging suitcases and half-wrapped gifts, the chaos and excitement of returning home to families most of them haven't seen in months. Ochako can't help a pang of loneliness. It's going to be so quiet with everyone gone.

Iida takes one look at her face and sweeps her up in a spinning hug. "Work hard!" he tells her severely. "We're counting on you to represent the best of UA."

"Yeah, yeah," she rolls her eyes but squeezes back. "Say hi to your brother for me."

Iida sets her down and turns his sights on Midoriya. “And you! I want to hear of nothing but a peaceful and relaxing week when you get back! You are going to sleep in and play video games and you are going to like it!”

Midoriya sputters. “Well, it’s not like I’m just going to *stop* training!”

Ochako leaves them to bickering and wanders off to share parting wishes with the rest of her friends. Eeven Tsu’s taking the week off, at the behest of her parents.

They bid their farewells, with promises to text every day, and Ochako helps her carry her bags down to the shuttle. Back inside, she spots another familiar figure lingering by the windows, suitcase at her feet and phone in hand.

Ochako comes to stand beside her. “Back home to, where is it again... Iwate?” she guesses.

Hagakure’s collar shifts, presumably glancing up from her phone. “Yep! But it’s so cool you get to stay and work over the break.”

Ochako shrugs, at once proud and regretful. “Yeah, but you’ll get to see your family.” She really should try to find some time to visit her parents this week. Dad’s hours were cut again, and she knows things at home have been a little tight. They always are, this time of year. Maybe she can bring takeout for dinner - something she can pick up after her evening shift, assuming nothing crazy happens during patrol.

“Are you going down to the shuttle?” she asks.

“No, I’m just going to walk to the train station.”

“By yourself?” Ochako frowns. “Is Aizawa okay with that?”

Hagakure laughs and waves an arm in front of the blank space of her face. “Oh, I’ll be fine. The League of Villains can’t catch what they can’t see.”

Lonely

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hagakure.

Hagakure Tooru.

The name spins in dizzying circles, a neon sign blurred by the rush of adrenaline and senseless anger.

Hagakure.

What the *fuck* does he know about Hagakure?

Nothing. She's in 1-A. She's invisible. That's *it*.

It doesn't make sense. It could be anyone, Nedzu had said, so long ago, and of course he knew that, he had always known that, but-- but--

A 1-A student. It seems impossible, suddenly. Unfathomable. Her whole future lit up like a grand stage, set for glory. A script already written, herself the star. Well on her way to becoming everything Hitoshi'd ever dreamed of.

And she gave it up. Threw it away. Betrayed it. The very ideal of it, and every single person who helped lay its foundations.

Why?

That's where he keeps getting caught, wringing himself to try to wrap his head around it - the motive, the answer. Like some sick joke, waiting for the punchline. Why? The question rings in his ears as he stammers through the rest of a stilted conversation with Twice--“For real though, do me a favour and don't tell Kurogiri I told you?”--and moves mindlessly through the mess at his feet.

The mess. The house. His gaze jerks up, scurries around the room with sudden, inexplicable panic. Where is he? Moments ago it hadn't mattered, but now it's all he can think. How does he get out of here?

He doesn't know. He doesn't know how to get out of any of this. The rising tide of terror breaks like a wave - ice-cold and painfully clear

with what he's ignored for so long. He doesn't *have* an exit strategy. He'd all but forgotten he'd need one. So twisted up in his role, in this game, in the delicate dance of finding footing in this new reality. He'd all but forgotten the traitor.

Wasn't that what this was all for? Not some vacation from real life, some suicidal exercise in method acting, some crazy chance for him to get so wrapped up in his own head and inflated sense of self-importance that he nearly forgot the *whole fucking point*.

But he has it now, he thinks deliriously. He kept his promise. He has the name. He could-- hell, he could blow this whole thing open right now. He's already off the League's home base. Only Twice stands in his way. Well, Twice and his doubles. Not impossible odds. He could run. Brainwash them, right now, and take off, run for help, run screaming down the street -- hell, get himself arrested for all he cares. He could get *out* of here.

He stares at Twice, still meandering about the room, picking through clutter and waste. Clinical, calm, like Aizawa taught him, he pictures the man beneath the mask, imagines how to pry him open, how to twist his words and mind. He scans the room, the exits, the doubles - calculates the space between them. *Minds of their own*, Twice had said. He needs to put all three under before any one has the chance to notice.

It's tempting. But dangerous, reckless. The kind of move there's no coming back from, the kind of mistake you don't survive. He could do it. Probably.

A shift in the air makes the choice for him - the hairs on the back of his neck rigid as a familiar chill creeps into the room. A black tear peels open in the air of the doorway.

"Shinsou," Kurogiri steps through and inclines his head in greeting. "I hope you didn't do too much of the work by yourself?"

"Hey," Twice barks. "I did my share."

Kurogiri eyes the residue of a pulverized can of beans. "Yes, I'm sure." He turns back to Shinsou. "Thank you for offering your help. I know it couldn't have been terribly fun, but I appreciate it."

Hitoshi stares. Twice, then back to Kurogiri--the bulk of him eating up the narrow space of the doorway. There somehow isn't an ounce of threat to it.

“Ready to go home?”

Endear them to you, Nedzu had said. And he did. He has. It's right there in Twice's relaxed posture and loose lips, in Kurogiri's watchful eyes, in the head tilted with the flicker of a smile - a fondness reserved for very few.

He's safe. He doesn't have an exit strategy, but he doesn't need one. Not yet.

They go home.

He floats through the motions of normality like a ship cast adrift, thoughts muted and dark, threatening to wash him away if he sinks too deep. He feels his feet moving, doesn't quite register where. He listens to Compress monologue, watches Spinner drink too much, lets himself be pulled into another sparring session with Toga. At her behest, they even manage to rope Dabi into another few rounds.

It's probably not the best idea--he's running on fumes, strangely numb, caught between wondering why he came back and wondering what the fuck's going to happen when he eventually doesn't. When he eventually takes this information to Nedzu, to Aizawa. When he goes home. Actual home. When this place stops feeling like a home.

That's the last surface-level thought he remembers for a while. Next thing he knows, he's sprawled flat on the concrete, eyes pulsing with pain - a bruised ego and a sharp sprain in his wrist.

It's not enough, the name alone. He needs to know more. About her. About why.

He brushes off Toga's mocking laughter and Dabi's muttered apology, drags himself up the stairs and stumbles into the kitchen. It's quiet. Dark. He keeps the lights off, presses a makeshift icepack to his wrist and pillows his face against the cool plastic of the countertop. Stares at the backs of his eyes and wills himself back into his own body.

He'll go find Kurogiri, he decides, if the man doesn't seek him out first. His abysmal display against Dabi must have been something to behold, and word of his ass kicking will get around soon enough.

Hitoshi's come to recognize the way concern flickers through Kurogiri's mask. He's been busy lately - business comes first, after all. But Hitoshi knows he won't come far second.

It won't be suspicious if he asks questions. He has every reason to - natural curiosity at having gained another ally, a supposedly like-minded individual. He could feign loneliness - wanting to spend more time with more people his age. That could lead into the topic of how often Hagakure pays them visits, and from there, what kind of information she provides.

He could play against Kurogiri's comforting instincts. Feign jealousy, fear of replacement. Except Kurogiri's response might play down her contribution, so that could give him a skewed idea of her importance. But it's a good way to breach the topic. Kurogiri will like it - Hitoshi coming to him for advice.

"They never taught you to fight at UA? You're really quite good."

"You saw me get my ass kicked? And you didn't even step in to help?" Hitoshi lifts his head blearily. "I'm wounded."

Kurogiri stifles a laugh. "Dabi's very controlled. He wouldn't have hurt you."

"I know, he didn't even use his quirk," he groans. "Really, I'm wounded. Pride and all."

Kurogiri moves closer. "How's your hand?"

Hitoshi lifts his wrist for inspection. It's a lovely shade of blue, tender and fat with swelling. He won't be taking any notes anytime soon, but then, he's not exactly in class anymore.

"May I?" Kurogiri asks, and prods it carefully. Hitoshi hardly feels the touch, skin numb from the ice, but Kurogiri's still immeasurably gentle, bending it forward and back, a sympathetic hum at Hitoshi's wince.

I would never allow a child to be hurt simply for the pleasure of it.

He wonders if he fed Hagakure the same lie.

"You should stabilize it for now. It'll do better to ice it once the swelling has gone down."

"Yeah," Hitoshi says, and swallows back a sudden wave of nausea.
"Thanks."

Kurogiri quiets, eyes searching. Hitoshi feels the shift and straightens on instinct, mind racing back over the interaction to try to find the source of the change. But the strange mood is gone just as fast as it came. Kurogiri lowers Hitoshi's hand back to the counter, leaves his own resting gently beside it. Warm and solid and human, despite all outward appearance.

Hitoshi's chest aches, remembering the first time - the attack on UA, Kurogiri's hand curled around his. His whole life as his feet, darkness ahead.

"I know about Hagakure," he admits softly, before he can think better of it. "Twice told me, by accident." And then, "Please don't be angry."

"I'm not angry," Kurogiri says quickly. "You've done nothing wrong."

Hitoshi shrugs, takes a moment to ride it out - the conviction of the words, the inexplicable tide of guilt that follows. "I get it. I get why you didn't tell me."

"I'm sorry."

Hitoshi's mouth snaps shut, and the careful script he'd constructed in his head collapses at his feet. "You're sorry?"

A flicker passes over Kurogiri's face. "Yes, I am. It must be terribly lonely, to think you're the only one to have stood where you stand. To think you're the only one to have had to make the choices you've faced."

"I'm not lonely," Hitoshi says, the truth of the declaration a surprise to himself. "I have you."

Kurogiri's throat works soundlessly for a moment. "I'm... You can't imagine how pleased I am to hear that, Shinsou." He glances away, seems to consider his next words carefully. "I think perhaps it would do us all some good to be... to be a little more open with each other. A little more present. These past weeks have been difficult for everyone." He smiles to himself, working through some private thought. "You know, she's been asking to meet you."

"She has?"

Kurogiri nods. “She used to stay with us, much like you do. But that became too dangerous once she began attending UA, and nearly impossible once they moved their students into the dorms.”

Of course they’d know about that. They probably know about it all - every last move the class takes. The incident at USJ, and again earlier this year with Bakugou Katsuki, when All Might lost his powers. All of it, because of her. An old anger crystalizes within him, and with it, that same question of why, why, *why*.

“What about her family? She didn’t... stay with them, before?”

Kurogiri tips his head. “It’s complicated. And not my place to say.”

“But she has one? A family?”

“Certainly,” Kurogiri says, and fixes him again with a long look. “She has one right here.”

Hitoshi shakes his head, lets that thread hang unanswered. There’ll be time. He’s got nothing but time. “It’s genius,” he says instead. “Her, attending UA. No one would ever suspect a kid.”

“No,” Kurogiri says. “I don’t suppose anyone would.”

Chapter End Notes

Well many of you saw it coming! As always your predictions have been thrilling and anxiety-inducing to read but I hope the reveal was satisfying 🤖

Again, apologies for the shortness of the recent chapters, but I am finding it easier to break them down into more manageable chunks like this. Hopefully this way I can continue to post at a quicker frequency.

Thank you all for reading ❤️📖

Everyone's Favourite Villain

Chapter Notes

Specific TW for this chapter. Skip to end notes to read.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Something's different.

Hitoshi can't put a name to it, and even with the benefit of hindsight, can't quite pin down the moment it happened, but he feels it as sure as a sudden shift in the weather - clouds blown over to reveal clear skies, a startling change in perspective.

Something's different about Kurogiri.

He's still elusive as ever most hours of the day - running deliveries off-base for Shigaraki and scoping out new locations with Giran. But somewhere between the late nights and too-early mornings, between the empty spaces and residual fog that lingers behind him, he finds Hitoshi.

It's always odd times of day - a smoke break at dawn, a hushed conversation at midnight. Hitoshi takes up semi-permanent residence in the kitchen in the intervening absences, with aims to have something other than Twice's leftovers for when Kurogiri breezes in on late evenings. It paints an odd picture, he's sure - and hits a surprisingly painful reminder of when he used to do the same for mom, counting down the end of another one of her 36-hour shifts at Saitama General.

Sure enough, just like mom would, Kurogiri comes back exhausted but keen for company, usually brimming with complaints of the day's various inconveniences, eager for a listening ear. It's like the air's been cleared between them - no more dancing around acts of violence or endangerment of children, no more shielding him from ugly truths. It's like Kurogiri *trusts* him.

There's a lot Hitoshi wants to ask, names and details he could pry for, but he withholds it in favour of the more important task. He throws himself at the subject of Hagakure with all the grace of throwing himself on a minefield, lets himself stumble over words in his eagerness to get them out, lets his astonishment bleed through. Of *course* he's curious, and why shouldn't he be?

Kurogiri feeds the fire like he's got a debt to pay, forthright in every answer. Apparently, the League's newer members know as much about her as Hitoshi does. For obvious reasons, she hasn't been around since she began attending UA. Dabi, Spinner, and Toga, it turns out, have never even met her.

She's been with the League since she was young, though. Very young. *Giran brought her in*, Kurogiri tells him, and Hitoshi can't even begin to picture what that must have looked like.

The thought haunts him like a spectre, startling him in the lounge, in the hall, down on the empty factory floor. He tries to picture her in the empty spaces. Does she know this place like he does? Does she think of it as her home?

Is she like him?

He can imagine how an invisibility quirk could be viewed negatively, cloaking her with a sense of distrust. The unease, the isolation - to always be looked through, never actually *seen*. But surely that isn't enough to turn to a life of villainy. There has to be more to it, some missing piece to slot the puzzle together, some reason *why*.

And how does her role at UA factor into it all? Proximity to All Might aside, the League preaches themselves to be righteous, to be *family*. Why, then, would they let one of their own, one of their *youngest*, be separated from them, steeped in danger and completely isolated?

Shit. That must be exactly what mom and Aizawa were thinking, back when this all started.

The thought hits an ugly chord, sends a pang of something suspiciously like homesickness through him. Long days blend into longer nights, and even with Kurogiri's recurring company, even with the single-minded focus of the mission, his thoughts start to waver more and more - memories of the apartment's crowded warmth, of UA's towering grandeur.

Therein lies his next problem. He's been balancing on the edge of a knife for months, and while there's no doubt he's gotten damn good at it, it hasn't gotten any less dangerous. Every stunt the League pulls, every mantra they spout, every gun they place in his hands, pulls him deeper, pushes him closer to some inevitable point of no return, some trigger he won't be able to live with pulling. It can't go on forever.

It's time to start thinking of the end.

He's got nothing but time. And if he bides it well enough, he may be able to slip out unnoticed, drastic measures untaken. But he needs to start forming the plan now.

Saitama Prefecture is as close as he's ever going to be to familiar territory, which means if he's going to make a move, it'll have to be before the League relocates. That way, he's got a straight path to UA, and more importantly, Aizawa. It'll have to be the first stop, not in the least because any other Pro he stumbles into is sure to toss his ass in prison, but also because there's no way he's going *home* - if things go badly, he doesn't want it leading to mom.

He places a mental pin for the week after winter break, when UA's halls are full and back to their normal schedule, but hopefully before the League has settled on a new location. Kurogiri's already revealed a number of possibilities in the running - a rice farm on the outskirts of Shizuoka, an abandoned military base near Kagoshima. Hitoshi shudders to think of the long trek home from either - he'll need to be long gone by then.

"Well, I imagine Giran's eager to pin down a new place before we start expanding our ranks. We're certainly not hurting for new recruits, right now," Compress lets on, late that night, after cigarette smoke clouds the air and several rounds of drinks have made their way around. "Seems we've stirred up quite a bit of interest since our little advertisement campaign." He smiles at Hitoshi, a shared victory.

"Yeah, shit, you seen all the copycats in the news?" Magne shakes her head. "They're keeping the Pros busier than we are."

"Oh, yes. Giran's got his pick. He'll let us know if any of them seem worth our time." Compress directs this last part toward Hitoshi, by way of explanation.

"No fuckin' way. Bunch of pussies is what they are. Just-- just *fakes* !" Spinner slurs, his injured leg propped up on a chair. He's been that way most of the day, still waylaid by his injury and pain meds. Unsurprisingly, he hasn't let it stop him from joining them at the bar.

Hitoshi ignores him with practiced ease. "Giran's normally the one who scopes out the new talent, right?"

Compress nods. "The man's got eyes and ears everywhere."

"And money!" Twice adds.

“Yes, and that. He’s perhaps the most... approachable to the average person.”

Which might explain why he spends so little time with the rest of them. If he’s got money and a place of his own to stay, he must have a life somewhere outside it all, hidden in plain sight among heroes and civilians.

“Hey, if he finds anyone good, you might not be the fresh blood much longer,” Toga nudges him with a grin. “Pretty soon you’ll be running this place.”

“Whoa now,” Magne rolls her eyes. “Don’t let Shigaraki hear that.”

Hitoshi holds back a wince. In all his imagined escape attempts, Shigaraki’s still the most dangerous variable - a loose canon inexorably pointed his way. If he gets caught by one of the others, he might be able to talk his way out of it. If he gets caught by Shigaraki though, he won’t be alive long enough to try.

The man’s nowhere to be seen tonight, thankfully. Neither is Kurogiri, though that’s no surprise either. Another late night - *out babysitting*, he’d been told with a wink by Twice. Whatever that’s supposed to mean.

His fingers twitch at the reminder of Kurogiri, craving a smoke. The others have long-since made it clear he doesn't need to step outside to do so, but Hitoshi still prefers it - the excuse for privacy, the all-too-rare chance to clear his head.

“I know that look.” Toga’s hand closes around his arm. “Don’t you dare. The fun’s just getting started.”

There’s a round of shots after that, a short-lived poker match that ends in accusations of cheating, and another round of drinks later to make up for the first fight that follows. Compress settles back with a pipe of something bitter and sharp. The room takes on a hazy edge, and Hitoshi feels his eyes droop.

Toga rouses him with a punch to the shoulder. “Bored yet?” She produces a bottle from under the table, uncaps it and shakes out to round, candy-shaped tablets. “Mooched ‘em off Magne. Wanna try?”

It takes him longer than it should to comprehend the question. “Oh, uh,” Hitoshi gives a nervous laugh. “I’m good, thanks.”

Toga sticks out a tongue. “Ugh, don’t be bitch.” She pops one under her tongue and places the other gingerly next to Hitoshi’s glass. “Come on, it’s not like you got anywhere to be tomorrow.”

Hitoshi stares, thoughts jumping like a spark. She’s right, of course, and he’s honestly surprised he made it this far without being petitioned before. It’s obviously a familiar indulgence to the League, and a bonding activity he may be permanently cutting himself off from if he declines it now.

He’s saved from responding by the mercy of Twice, eternally ignorant to Hitoshi’s fevered mental calculations and possessed with a single-minded focus. “Up, up, up,” he says, jerks Hitoshi from his seat and plants him in front of the dart board, “Best out of three.”

They earn themselves a small audience, mostly in the form of Spinner, who predictably jeers at Hitoshi’s every miss. He’s clumsy from the booze, and still trying to be careful of his injured wrist, and after three straight wins, Twice quickly loses interest in favour of challenging one of his own doubles.

Hitoshi stumbles back to his seat with his pride barely intact, glad to slip from the spotlight. *God*, he wants a smoke - always does, when he’s drunk. But Toga’s got that little smirk, glancing at him from the corner of her eye like she *knows* he’s about to pull a runner. He settles for downing the rest of his lukewarm beer instead.

And for a while after that, the set of his shoulders relaxes, breath coming languid and easy. He listens with half an ear to the chatter and faint music around him, feels his chin bob and fingers tap to the beat. He laughs at nothing, then again at the sound of his own laughter. He glances down at his empty cup and realizes a lifetime too late that the pill isn’t on the table anymore. Toga’s grin is sharp enough to cut steel.

He stares hard at the table, the whorls in the woodwork that could be wine, could be blood, and wills the image to steady. He’s suddenly hyper-aware of the feeling in his fingertips, the thrum of his pulse beneath the skin and building pressure behind his eyes, too wide and too dry. He blinks hard. “My mom is a doctor,” he finds himself saying, and doesn’t remember if anyone asked. “And you’re definitely not supposed to mix stimulants and alcohol. Your liver could, like, explode.”

Someone laughs and someone pats his back, and Hitoshi might flinch

a moment too late, might not even flinch at all except for in his mind, because his body isn't reacting like he wants it to. A dart sinks into the wall somewhere to his left and someone starts singing and the news is on and he doesn't remember who got up to change the channel, but this detail feels excruciatingly important, suddenly--the image on the screen moving in strange shutters, and he sees his face, sees the League, sees UA, and feels cold with terror.

He stands. Hallway. Bathroom. Cracked tile and buzzing lights. He's alone? The sight of his reflection does funny things to his brain, so he cups his hands beneath the faucet and squeezes his eyes shut, splashes icy water across the flushed skin of his face and neck.

He makes himself throw up, tastes bile and beer. The nausea eases afterwards, but he spends another five minutes with his head pressed unceremoniously to the toilet for good measure. No one misses him enough to come after him, and he doesn't know if that's good or bad. Can't really bring himself to care.

Minutes slip by hazily. He trudges through his thoughts like a street cleaner, scrubbing them raw, pushing aside the dust and debris of panic. It was just a joke. Just Toga being Toga. He'll probably never hear the end of it, but it's fine. He's *fine*.

It's a while still before he can convince his legs to straighten. Raucous shouts and clinking glasses promise of the ongoing party, but he skirts past the door without lifting his head, makes his way instead downstairs to the factory floor. His footsteps echo, spilling into the silence around him.

He hits the bottom step before he notices the lights are already on across the warehouse. Movement, the low murmur of voices - Kurogiri, and another he doesn't recognize. A breeze accompanies them as they step through the doorway, a blast of winter air and the trailing smoke of a recently closed portal.

He freezes, gut tight with dread, certain he already knows what he's about to see, and suddenly *terrified* to see it. But it's too late - they step into view in tandem, and he feels the instant Kurogiri spots him.

He doesn't stick around to see if she does too.

Animal instinct takes over - he races back up the stairs three at a time, an inexplicable guilt clawing at his heels.

He doesn't go back to the others - doesn't even entertain the idea, in

his current state. His retreat takes him without conscious thought to his makeshift safe-haven, the hum of the kitchen's industrial freezer background noise to the staccato of his heart.

His hands twitch, paralyzed by indecision.

Kurogiri will come find him.

Fuck it.

He puts a kettle to boil, stares at the red glow of the element, and waits.

The steam hisses. He sets out two cups, chipped but clean, and pours carefully. Cheap tea leaves swirl in the clouded water like little bits of debris. He picks them up, still waiting.

Footsteps pause at the threshold, and Hitoshi frowns.

It isn't Kurogiri.

"Hi," Hagakure says.

She cuts a strange silhouette in the doorway, the bulk of a winter coat filling out her shoulders, but with the hood down and front unzipped to reveal the empty space that plunges beneath the collar of her shirt. Hitoshi stares, trying to make sense of it. He'd be several inches taller than her, he thinks distantly, if her head were visible to measure against.

Hagakure says something else, but he misses it by a mile. "Sorry, what?"

"Are you okay?" she says, and moves closer.

His eyes skip about, searching for the mouth to match the words. He drops them instead, focuses on the boots. Solid, visible. They pause before him. A question. She asked him a question. "Sorry," he says again. "Yeah. Just. Toga gave me drugs. So." He makes to wave a hand in explanation, but he's still holding both cups of tea. He puts them down. Picks them up again. "You want this?"

"Are there... drugs in it?"

"I *fucking* hope not," he says, and places the mug in her hands before she can answer. He feels the shift of weight as her fingers close around the handle, but second-guesses himself, waits a beat too long to

release it. A delicate dance - one he doesn't know the steps to yet.

The cup floats before him. Then, slowly, she circles him. Hitoshi steps back, but she just pulls out a stool. Hitoshi takes cue, and watches from the corner of his eye as the cup tips against invisible lips. It feels distinctly unreal, almost laughable - two UA traitors, sipping shitty tea, side-by-side on rickety bar stools in a dingy, semi-abandoned warehouse.

"So, like. This is insane, isn't it?"

He's amazed that the words are out of her mouth and not his. "I can't believe they didn't tell me."

"Right?" Her body curves in. She must be looking at him. "I mean, yeah, I get it. But I was so jealous. You're like the *only* thing we talk about at school."

"I am?"

"With the stunts you're pulling now?" she gives a delighted laugh, and her voice is so *young*. "Quirkblog's having a frenzy. You're, like, everyone's favourite villain."

He suppresses a grimace. He'd known as much - had seen it on the news every other night, but hearing it from Hagakure feels more real. He can picture it so easily - the crowded halls laden with whispers, phones hidden beneath desks in class and passed from hand to hand over lunch. Articles and video essays and blog posts shared with the click of a button. The same kind of shit he'd have scrolled through just to pass the time on the train to school - *Japan's Top 10 Villainous Quirks*.

"And anyway," she continues. "I've been wanting to meet you *forever*. Like, properly meet you."

He nods. There's a short list of shared encounters. He can only think of one, really, months ago in the halls of UA. Was it then, he wonders, that she decided to tell the League about him? All those weeks of wondering and worrying and jumping at every shadow - the detentions, the lectures, the fights, had it all led to that moment? It seems ridiculous in hindsight, that anything so trivial could have set the stage for what his life has become now.

He can't imagine what it would be like to still be at UA, every day, playing that part, living that lie. How lonely it would be.

He opens his mouth and isn't sure what he wants to come out - commiseration, gratitude, disbelief. How could he possibly empathize with someone like her? How could he *not*?

Footsteps in the doorway announce another presence, and Hitoshi looks up to find Kurogiri watching them. His expression does something complicated and altogether impossible to decipher, eventually settling on a regretful smile. "Hagakure, I'm afraid your train will be arriving in Iwate shortly."

Hitoshi looks between them. "You're going?"

"Back home." Hagakure's voice gives a wry twist.

"It's winter break, isn't it? You don't stay in the dorms?" His logic catches up with him seconds behind his mouth. "Of course not. It would--"

--Raise too many questions, yes." Kurogiri inclines his head. "But unfortunately, it's too dangerous for her to stay with us either. At least for now. We make use of another safe house, in times like this."

"Lucky me - I get to go play house with dear old Uncle Giran." Hagakure lowers her cup and hops off the stool. "At least I didn't actually have to take the train, eh?" She doesn't wait for a response, just slips her hood over her head. From behind, she looks perfectly normal - could be anyone else. At least until she turns back, hollow and expressionless. "I'll see you around, Shinsou."

She steps to Kurogiri's side, and the curling mist washes over them. Hitoshi watches, stomach in knots and words lagging as the fog eclipses his vision.

"See you," he whispers, but the room is already empty.

Chapter End Notes

TW: This chapter features the POV character being drugged without consent and experiencing a panic attack.

Happy

Eri looks even smaller than usual, seated behind a table nearly tall enough for her to rest her chin, her hospital gown loose around her shoulders and toes brushing the floor. She sits better than half of 1-A, straight-backed and inhumanely still. Only her hands give her away, fidgeting in her lap where they're hidden from view of the detectives across the table.

There's a nurse sitting unobtrusively in the corner, and a guard standing watch outside the door. Shouta, too, is here on business - 'mediating,' in case her quirk gets out of control again. An awful lot of fanfare for a single kid, he thinks. But then, he's seen what she can do when overwhelmed. He's not eager for another demonstration.

Which is why he plants himself at the table beside Eri, instead of the vacant chair across the room meant for him. He watches those hands, the chewed-down nails, cracked skin and peeling bandages, herself tiny and heart-breakingly stoic despite the pain she must be in. She picks at the scabs, and nearly flinches out of her skin when he touches her shoulder to still her.

She has an appointment with a quirk specialist this afternoon, and a parade of childhood trauma counsellors after that. It seems utterly inhumane that the interrogation was deemed more urgent.

We just wanna ask some questions, one of the detectives told her, the table between them like a buffer. He clearly works with kids, but he's still nervous, Shouta can tell. Most of the nurses are too - he's not yet seen one of them touch her without Shouta himself in the room. He can't imagine Eri hasn't noticed.

The detectives lay laminated pictures across the table, depicting the empty rooms of the Eight Precepts base. The photos are washed out under the flash of the camera, littered with scuff-marks and blood-splatters, evidence markers and police tape. They point to different objects and ask Eri to identify them - a used syringe, a padlocked door, a child's bed.

They carefully lay a picture of Overhaul, hard-eyed and unmasked. Eri's eyes fill with tears. She doesn't speak until they cover it.

"Just a few more," one of the detectives says kindly. "You're doing great." He shuffles through a batch of mugshots, a few sketches.

Shigaraki Tomura. “Do you recognize him?”

Eri hesitates. “I dunno.”

He nods, flips over another picture. A blurry surveillance camera shot of Kurogiri. “How about him?”

“Um.” She picks at her bandages, jolts again when Shouta touches her shoulder. “Maybe.”

“Okay, okay. Last one.” The detective rifles through his pile. “How about him?”

Eri’s eyes lock onto Hitoshi - dead-eyed against a white backdrop. His student ID picture.

Shouta’s breath stutters in his throat.

“Do you recognize him?”

Eri nods slowly. Shrugs. Nods again. “Um. He was... nice.”

Shouta’s chest goes tight, tongue burning with a dozen questions he can’t let himself ask. The detectives share an indecipherable look and launch after the opening - when did you see him, and where, and what was he doing. Eri does her best, but it’s nothing they don’t already know - the Eight Precepts did business with the League. A brief encounter, an undisclosed location, a trade - bullets for cash. The details escape her, and no wonder. She must have been terrified.

Afterwards, the detectives linger in the hallway with the nurses and guards. They take statements and sign nondisclosure agreements and choke the whole place up in so much red tape and bureaucracy that they hardly seem to see Eri beneath it all, stock-still in her chair, eyes glued to the empty table like she can still see the ghosts of the images spread across it. Shouta feels sick at the sight.

No one stops him when he gently coaxes her to her feet, or when he wraps her in his coat and swaddles his own weapon round her neck like a scarf. No one so much as glances their way, even as he slips her hand in his and leads her from her room.

The hospital grounds are quiet, this early. There’s a thin layer of dew on the grass, the air sharp and bright and clear, and the small playground behind the hospital campus is perfectly still, dappled in wintery sunlight and the distant sounds of morning traffic.

Eri's eyes go wide as they approach, staring at the neon jungle-gym like she's never seen such a monstrosity in her life. She lingers at the edge of the playground, seemingly overwhelmed by the options, face painted in mixed curiosity and fear. With a little guidance, she eventually settles on the edge of the carousel, its rusted joints creaking in the cold. Shouta gives it a gentle push in demonstration.

She doesn't giggle or squeal or do any of the things little girls ought to do. But she doesn't look like she hates it either. Shouta supposes he'll count that as a win.

He pushes her for a minute, then lets her drift to a stop. "Eri... That boy in the picture. The one you said was nice. Did he... help you?"

She nods, cheeks pink from the cold, and lifts a hand to her horn. "He helped me with-- with the..."

"Your quirk?"

"Yeah. It didn't hurt, when he helped."

Shouta frowns. "Does it normally?"

She shrugs, gaze distant. Shouta changes tactics. "You only met him once, right?"

"Yeah," she says. "He had blood on his face."

"What?"

Eri jumps, and Shouta schools himself, smooths out his tone. "Sorry."

She stares back warily, burrowed in the makeshift scarf of his weapon.

"I'm sorry," Shouta says again. "I'm not angry."

Hitoshi looked fine at the bank, Shouta reminds himself. No visible injuries, though of course he hadn't known then to look for them. He could pry for specifics, he supposes, but one look at Eri cuts that thought short, a knot of guilt bitter in his throat. It's her first time at a playground, for fuck's sake. He might as well let her enjoy it.

"I'm glad he was nice to you, Eri," he says. "People are going to be nice to you, from now on. I promise."

He scowles over the playground, determined to find something she'll enjoy. She needs instruction, demonstration - something they can do

together. Swings are no good - too high a chance of injury. Sand would only make a mess of her bandages, so sandcastles are definitely out. His eyes land on their last resort, and he stifles a sigh.

“Teeter-totter,” he says severely. “Ever been on one?”

“I’m seriously *pissed* nobody told me Hagakure was here yesterday.”

Toga lays spread out across the back of the couch, her legs dangling in the air above her. She throws a dart, upside down, into the ceiling.

Hitoshi has wisely taken up a seat on the floor across the room, far from potential danger. Not that he expects her to *miss*--her accuracy is frightening, if unsurprising--but given that he was one of the very people who neglected to tell her about Hagakure’s impromptu visit, he may just be her next target.

“As if *you* got to talk to her and I didn’t.” She drives this point home with another dart. Even upside down, her scowl is formidable.

He hums empathetically, unwilling to give in to an actual conversation. He’s been trying to dance around the subject all morning, still struggling privately to wrap his head around last night’s encounter.

“I just wish there was another *girl* around here,” Toga sighs. “Like, Magne’s cool, but she’s kind of a bitch.”

Magne calmly flips them off from across the room.

Hitoshi laughs on cue, but his thoughts are elsewhere. He’s already replayed through his conversation with Hagakure more times than he can stand - straining to remember every pause, every shift in inflection or posture. Like if he could just visualize it, if he could just *see her*, everything might finally click into place.

Somewhere between the initial reveal of a traitor in UA all those months ago and now, he’d built up the image in his mind of a veritable monument of a person - someone purely evil, a caricature of villainy. And then, when he’d found out it was *Hagakure*--the world’s *least memorable* UA student--he’d had to re-formulate his whole

conception. She would have to be an incredible liar to be so deep in her cover at UA - calm under pressure and quick on her feet. Maybe as conniving and silver-tongued as Compress, or as quiet and obsessive as Dabi. Hell, maybe as insane as Toga. As *Shigaraki*.

But she was none of those things.

She was perfectly, *horribly* normal.

The thought kept him awake for hours last night, and the wintery light of morning sheds no clarity on the matter either.

Spinner's off his crutches at last today, though he's still snappy as ever. Hitoshi does his best to avoid him - a feat made all the more difficult thanks to the man's renewed mobility. Coupled with Shigaraki, who always looks like he'd be happy to kill him on sight, Hitoshi's left dancing from room to room in hopes of escaping them both.

He ends up finding reprise in Compress and Toga--by far still the easiest of the League with whom to hold a civilized conversation--and even passes a few hours in the surlier company of Magne and Dabi.

It's not like those first days, when every breath was tense and every word poised to give him away, or even those first weeks, when he danced between flattering and mining them for information at every turn. They trade insults and jokes, share stories and comfortable silences - intimate, and yet ultimately, of little value.

Dabi's scars are self-inflicted, and he grew up the oldest of four siblings. Magne went to juvenile prison when she was sixteen, and reads nonstop in her spare time. Compress lived overseas for nearly a decade, and left behind a wife and child.

It's a strange mix of haunting and perfectly mundane, their lives both tragically complex and utterly normal. Dabi hates onions. Magne's thumbs are double-jointed. Compress used to be a kabuki actor, and even starred in Tokyo as Benton Kozo. He can still recite the lines to this day.

"Do *not* get him started," Magne begs, and Hitoshi laughs along, asks innocuous questions and offers innocuous answers of his own in reciprocity. They rib him for his lack of life experience and promise to help him expand it in the same breath. And it's all perfectly benign, comfortable, safe.

He can't help but wonder if Hagakure's ever gotten this same treatment--the camaraderie, the mentorship--or if she, like him, finds herself in the precarious position of receiving it instead from the very people she works against. How long since she was last here, in company of her allies? How long since she last got to let down her walls, take off the mask, stop pretending to be something she isn't? What's it like for her at UA - is she in constant fear, vigilant for every threat, forced to weigh every word and action, or has she perfected the balancing act? Is she comfortable? Is she safe?

Is she lonely?

"That face is never a good sign."

It's well past midnight when Hitoshi finds Kurogiri, finally back from wherever the emergency of the day had taken him. He's alone in the lounge, waistcoat abandoned over the back of a chair, cuffs unbuttoned and sleeves rolled back, the skin of his forearms pale and decidedly human. He's smoking--inside, for once, and Hitoshi doesn't blame him. The wind is vicious tonight--battering up against the tin walls of the warehouse like waves against the hull of a ship.

The joke hangs a beat too long. Kurogiri frowns. "What's on your mind?"

"Can't sleep," Hitoshi tells him honestly, and rubs his eyes.

"I'm sure Magne has something for that."

"I don't doubt it." He collapses into the nearest chair, props his feet up on Kurogiri's lap with a sullen, child-like pout, and claws at the air in the universal sign for "gimme."

Kurogiri huffs, but tosses over his lighter and pack. "I can see Toga's influence all over you. And to think you used to be so polite."

Hitoshi lights up around a laugh. "Eh, that's why we keep you around. *Someone's* got to be the positive role model around here."

Kurogiri snorts, but in the end, lets Hitoshi's feet stay where they are. They smoke together in amicable silence before Hitoshi finally breaks it.

"Long day?"

Kurogiri shrugs. "Things will quiet down shortly, with any luck. Giran

says we'll be safe enough after the move, but something's still got Shigaraki on edge."

Hitoshi nods solemnly, and tries not to think about *what*, exactly, that something might be. "Giran's with Hagakure, right?"

Kurogiri eyes him, then gives a nod.

"She told me yesterday," he explains.

"Yes, she shares his safehouse in Iwate."

"Hmm." Hitoshi sits on this for a minute, lets the smoke and unspoken words dangle in the air. "Do you think she's lonely?"

Kurogiri, to his surprise, gives the question due consideration. "I think it's very likely, yes. She'll have gotten used to being around those her age."

"And they're not even really her friends. The UA kids, I mean."

Hitoshi lowers his eyes, pretends to flick off a bit of ash. Face turned away, he goes for the kill. "I mean, all she ever does is lie to them. I can't imagine how isolating that must be." An ember dangles on the edge of the cigarette. It could hold the secrets of the universe, for all the attention he gives it. "I know it's too dangerous for her to be here, but... I just wish I could give her a break from that. I wish I could give her what I have. What you all gave me."

He finally risks a glance back up at Kurogiri, finds his face dark and creased in thought. "I'm sure she would like that," he says quietly.

"Would she?" he dares. "Could I?"

Kurogiri's expression pulls back, eyes once again sharp with a calculated focus. Hitoshi nearly straightens under the examination on instinct. "Yes," he says at last. "I think perhaps we can make that happen."

A modern, two-story manor dominates the center of a neatly-trimmed lawn, forested on three sides and shaded on the fourth by a tall hedge, carved up the center by a flagstone walkway. It's a beautiful house, and it's not until Hitoshi stands before it that he realizes, this can't

possibly just be Giran's safehouse. It's his *house* house.

Kurogiri sequesters him to the entrance with all the over-attentive gravity of a father dropping off his child for their first playdate. Their timing is expected - the door opens on cue to Giran, scowling as if done a personal offense. He and Kurogiri exchange a few hushed words before Kurogiri bids his farewells.

Hitoshi's still getting over the initial shock when he sees her, hovering in the entryway. It's impossible to guess what expression she wears, but he can *feel* the moment their eyes meet. Casual clothing, slippers. An elastic band hovers where her hair must be tied back. It dips into a measured bow.

He would laugh, if he weren't trying so desperately to pretend anything about this were normal.

She leads him through a maze of sliding doors, past tall rooms and walls lined with the antiques - the kind of decor that speaks to Giran's connections. They come to a sitting room with a low table and tatami floors, windows overlooking a garden.

"Nice place," Hitoshi breaks at last.

Hagakure's collar bobs - a nod. He wonders how often she has to do that - over-exaggerate her movements so people can see them. "Yeah. It's pretty cool."

An awkward pause. Hitoshi glances at her from the corner of his eye, trying to gauge its source. His presence is hardly anything worth being starstruck by. She almost seems *embarrassed*.

"So," he blows out a long breath. "What have you been up to?"

"Ah." She gestures to a neat pile of study books on the table.

"Homework, mostly. We got a buttload of assignments to right before break, so. Trying to get it out of the way, you know?"

Hitoshi nods. Considers his next words. "Need any help?"

She gives a sharp laugh, then presses a hand over her mouth. "You're kidding."

Hitoshi makes a face, and snags the first book off the pile. The cover is painfully familiar. "Ah-*ha*, what's this, algebra?" he grins. "I'll have you know, I was a straight-A student."

It's a lie, and they both know it, but Hagakure seems so amused by the idea that she concedes without a fight. And so, there they sit, legs tucked beneath the table, heads bent together, while Hitoshi helps the UA traitor with her *math homework*.

For all that his grades had sunk to the ocean's depths by the time he had left UA, he *is* actually pretty good at math. It's interesting to see how many lessons he's fallen behind the rest of their year, but even so, he catches on quickly enough. Before he knows it, they're tackling the questions two at a time - Hitoshi focused one while Hagakure works through another.

Giran drifts past the doorway a few times, a silent observer, but always pauses long enough to make his presence known. Hitoshi can't help but feel like he's someone's *dad*, checking in on his teenage daughter and her new, suspicious friend. Hagakure either doesn't notice or doesn't care - she's clearly comfortable enough with his company. She's living with him, after all.

When they're done, Hitoshi's itching for a smoke break. The garden out back is even nicer than the view from the window shows - a stone wall crawling with ivy, an orchid of cherry blossom trees, a koi pond with a miniature waterfall and wooden bridge spanning its length. Damn. He knew Giran was rich. But Giran is *rich*.

Hagakure stands on the porch and watches him peruse the garden, leaving a veritable smoke signal from behind the tall hedges. "Want one?" he offers, cigarette dangling between his lips.

She clutches her chest in fake shock. "Who, me? No, sorry, I have an image to maintain." She beckons him over anyway, pulls her phone from her pocket and tosses it. "Here, you can help me out with another assignment." She hops off the porch and trapezes over to the pond, gives a twirl by the water's edge.

Hitoshi blinks. "What?"

"Take my picture! Come on, I need to keep up my Instagram feed so no one on the outside gets *suspicious*." The sarcasm drips from her voice.

Hitoshi laughs. He never would have thought about that, but she's right. Teenage spies are still teenagers, after all. He stubs out the smoke and glances down at the phone, fiddles with the settings to familliarize himself. "Okay, stand next to that shrub. No, not that-- yeah, that one. Perfect, stay there."

He snaps a few pictures, calling out poses as he does. She flows from one to the next, pausing now and then to run to another part of the garden. He can only imagine she's smiling. "Did you get my good angle?"

He lowers the phone and dutifully flips back through the photo log - but finds himself momentarily stunned. No face, just clothes, suspended in air. In flat, two-dimension, it takes his eyes too long to register what they're looking at. She almost doesn't look like a person.

"So, any good ones?"

Reality settles back around him like a trickle of rain, guilt heavy in the base of his stomach. "Is it okay to post these? I mean, isn't this Giran's safehouse? What if someone recognizes it?"

"Relax, it's a koi pond. There's only forty-thousand of them in Japan."

The phone buzzes in his hand before he can formulate a response. He glances down and sees a groupchat notification - its title: *the reasons Aizawa drinks*. He wordlessly hands the phone to Hagakure.

She opens the message and sighs. "Hang on, just gotta..." He hears her fingers fly across the screen before she pockets it, response sent. "Sorry."

"1-A?" he asks.

A nod.

Shit. She never stops. She can *never* stop playing her role. Even now, all the way on the other side of the country, she has to maintain the facade. The mere thought is exhausting.

The weariness must show on his face, because suddenly, there's a warm hand on his wrist, tugging him forward.

"Oh, I'm not done with you yet. I'm making good use of my personal photographer while he's still here."

She takes him, like a maniac, in *public*.

“Hagakure,” he hisses. “You’re going to get us *arrested!*”

The village itself is mostly baitshops and sushi bars, the streets desolately empty in the tourist off-season. There’s an old pier off the main street draped in fishing line and rope, the smell of salt sharp in the brutal coastal wind. Hagakure stops by a takoyaki cart, then locks her arm in his and drags him down the pier, food in hand, like she doesn’t have a care in the world. “Shinsou, I live here,” she says. “I’m not going to get arrested.”

Hitoshi buries himself deeper in the hood of his jacket, a medical mask pulled up so high it nearly catches his eyelashes. He tenses as a young couple stroll past, staring out over the ocean, and wills them not to look his way. Nothing to see here. Just a couple of teenagers about town. Not suspicious at all.

He quickly takes a picture of Hagakure at the pier’s edge, leaning out over an ocean crystal blue and capped with white waves, but she flashes another pose, and another after that. Hitoshi casts another look over his shoulder, hoping the couple hasn’t turned around.

“I don’t know what you’re so worried about,” she says, finally hopping down from the edge. “I’m very good at going unnoticed when I want to.”

A single, hysteric laugh croaks out. “I’m *not*.”

She trades her phone for the remaining takoyaki, unhurried while she scrolls through the pictures. “Aw, this one’s nice.”

Without warning, she extends her arm, her other gloved hand forming a peace sign. Hitoshi stares, dumbfounded, and hears the sound bite *click* of the selfie camera’s shutter.

She’s faster than him - dodges his attempt to slap the phone away. The takoyaki isn’t so lucky, and tumbles to the ground as he stumbles into her. “Don’t you *dare--*” but he’s laughing, uncontrollably, the sheer ridiculousness bubbling out of him.

Her shoulders shake - he can feel her laughter too as he leans against her. “I’m joking, I’m joking.”

“That’ll *definitely* get you arrested.”

“I know, look, I’m deleting it--” She dodges another swipe. “Shinsou, stop, look, I’m deleting it!”

She does, true to her word - the damning evidence erased from existence. He lets the last of the laughter bleed out of him. This might be *the* stupidest thing he's ever done.

Another shutter sounds out.

Hitoshi freezes, dread like ice in his bones. Behind them, the young couple from earlier has paused on the opposite side of the pier, a selfie of their own caught with Hitoshi and Hagakure in the background.

He trades a look with the empty space of Hagakure's face, and wonders if they're thinking the same thing.

It's a twenty minute mission to destroy the man's phone, involving stalking, pick-pocketing, and outright sabotage. Hitoshi can't even bring himself to feel bad - the guilt swallowed by the heart-pounding excitement and tremendous *absurdity* of it all. By the time they make it back to Giran's house at the edge of town, they're still quaking with leftover tremors, breathless from their run across the village and the dredges of adrenaline.

In the doorway, Giran levels them a long, unimpressed look. "Do I even want to know?"

With Hagakure giggling at his side, Hitoshi feels none of the usual fear he does when faced with Giran. "Probably not," he says.

"Definitely not," Hagakure adds.

Giran narrows his eyes over Hitoshi. "Get out of my house."

Hitoshi doesn't wait to see if Giran will make good on his threat, and resigns himself nobly to waiting out the remainder of his visit in the garden. Kurogiri is there to gather him before long, and their return to the League's base is filled with all the usual fanfare and violence.

"What the hell?" Toga punches him on sight. "I literally told you I

wanted to visit Hagakure *yesterday*, asshole. Why the hell didn't you invite me?"

"Ask Kurogiri," Hitoshi offers evasively. "Maybe you can come next time."

Toga whirls on the man in question, leaving Hitoshi to slip away, grinning and unscathed.

There's go guarantee there'll even *be* a next time. But despite the day's close calls, he can't help but feel like that won't be the case. Hagakure will probably have to run damage control with Giran, and Hitoshi has half a mind to start drafting up a similar script to use on Kurogiri, but somehow he knows it won't be necessary. Kurogiri doesn't need convincing. He's already seen how happy Hitoshi was.

And he was. Happy.

The feeling lingers even as he collapses into bed, the ancient bedframe creaking beneath him, the rusted walls of his room cold to the touch. There's the pull of a smile at the edge of his lips - not the usual, half-cocked smirk he shoots Toga, or the small, vulnerable grin he puts on for Kurogiri. An honest smile, with no reason to weaponize it.

He still isn't sure what to think of Hagakure, how to categorize her, or handle her, or mine her for information like he does the others. No glaring triggers or vulnerabilities. No tells. Just a hero, trying to fit into the role given to her. Just a student, trying to make the most of her break. Just a traitor.

The thought grinds to a halt, unfinished. Just a traitor.

He wishes he knew anything else. He wishes he knew why.

He shakes off the lingering doubt, lets his eyes slip closed with a sigh. The end of winter break is coming up faster and faster - the looming deadline for what he's privately dubbed, *Plan Get the Hell Out of Here* . He's still got a week to observe, to learn, to pry and plot and twist the knife in deeper and deeper.

For the first time in as long as he can remember, he falls asleep with a smile.

The Traitor's Confidant

Chapter Notes

TW: This chapter contains a serious discussion between two characters about child abuse. Nothing takes place on screen and nothing is described in detail.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Shouta's patrol shift doesn't start for another four hours, but he's up with the sunrise anyway, bleary-eyed and stiff-jointed in the pale, gritty light of early morning. The city's covered in a quintessentially mid-winter grime, the usual glint of chrome and glass turned gray and dim, but by the time he drags himself from the warmth of the bedcovers and into the freefall of rooftop travel, the streets are beginning to wake beneath him, street lamps flickering off and shutters creaking open.

He slows before his first stop, drops to street-level for a more subtle entrance. The police station parking lot clamors with the comings and goings of shift rotation. Shouta finds a quiet bench to perch on, stifles a yawn and bemoans his lack of coffee in solitude.

Tsukauchi finds him before long--coffee in hand, the smug bastard--and throws an arm around the back of the bench. "The good news is, we finally got a date for the trial," he says, by way of greeting. "The bad news is, you're gonna have to be there."

Though their meetings have been delegated to strictly off the table, Tsukauchi has proved an invaluable resource since he stumbled his way into Nedzu's little *need-to-know* circle. Thanks to his position in the PD, he's able to keep tabs on all the leads Shinsou has won them, including new developments regarding the Eight Precepts takedown and subsequent legal detailings. It's a tremendous relief, knowing there's at least *someone* on the inside who knows what a delicate line they need to walk.

Shouta's worked with his share of Pros who stick around for the fight and nothing more, but a precarious situation like theirs requires tending to long after the punches stop being thrown. There are charges to press, sentences to dole out, juries and judges and worst of all, *reporters* to be swayed - and none of it can implicate Hitoshi.

The fall of the Eight Precepts rocked the criminal underworld, and villain gangs all across the country are looking to step into the empty space they left behind. That alone would be enough to keep law enforcement busy, not to mention all the red tape that comes with litigation.

“Still not sure if they’ll want Eri to testify. She would obviously be an invaluable witness on the stands,” Tsukauchi says, “But, you know, she’s also four years old.”

“Six,” Shouta corrects.

Tsukauchi shrugs him off. “At the very least, we’ll need an SME to go over the medical evidence.”

Shouta grimaces. He’s got a pretty good idea of who they’re going to ask.

He makes his next stop at Saitama General to deliver the news in person, after he finally caves in and gets a coffee of his own - thanks for *nothing*, Tsukauchi. In what is rapidly becoming a staple of his daily life, he tucks into a quiet corner of the hospital campus for another clandestine parking lot meeting. Haru accepts the news--and coffee, because unlike *some* people, Shouta has manners--with her usual stoicism, a knot of focused concentration in her brow.

“Eri’s moving to the rehab wing at the end of the week,” she tells him. “Not sure how long they’ll keep her.”

“Any news on foster care?”

Haru shakes her head. “No takers.”

Shouta’s not surprised. He can picture her file now - her quirk type emblazoned across the front page like a warning, branding her. *Dangerous, unstable*. A loaded gun.

Eri is still meeting with the quirk specialist daily, and will continue to do so until she is no longer deemed a threat to the public. Shouta finds the whole thing more than a little theatrical, but it’s a necessary evil, he knows. With a quirk like hers, she *needs* to learn control and precision, or she’ll spend the rest of her life being feared.

He wonders, off-handedly, if she could be trained by a hero specialist one day. Someone like Recovery Girl, maybe. He can already see the potential for healing that a quirk like hers would have. Maybe she

could even learn to reverse it, give people like Tsukauchi back what was taken from them.

It's a distant dream, though. Not anything that's likely to happen in the next few years. She's already been through enough - she deserves a break, if nothing else. But maybe one day.

Shouta downs his coffee and takes his leave shortly after. He pauses on the ledge of a nearby building to watch Haru cross the campus, making sure she gets inside unaccosted. The paparazzi are beginning to lose interest--even the most sensational stories get old, eventually--but there's still the occasional asshole hoping to get lucky.

The League has been uncharacteristically quiet lately. Whatever high they were riding from their stint of public stunts seems to have died down, and in the wake of the Eight Precepts takedown, they're one of the few gangs who haven't been encroaching on the newly emptied territory.

If anything, they seem to be *downgrading*. Diminished activity, an outright halt on recruits. They're cutting ties, cleaning up loose ends. They're being careful. For what, Shouta doesn't know, but he gets the distinct impression that it won't last.

"They're preparing for something," Nedzu concludes, when Shouta makes his final stop before patrol. Even with UA emptied for the holidays, Nedzu's got the lights low and the door to his office locked. Shouta had briefly considered kicking it down, but figured his energy was better spent on resenting Nedzu privately.

Nedzu's not the only one inside either, to his surprise. Toshinori nods in greeting, and listens with a frown as Shouta repeats Tsukauchi's report for the second time this morning. Nedzu doesn't take notes, but stares with the shrewd intensity of an eidetic memory committing Shouta words to the annals of history.

"If I had to guess, I would say they're preparing for a move," Nedzu says. "And one they don't want any of their affiliates knowing about."

Shouta nods. "Could be cold feet after getting burned with the Precepts?"

"Yes, possibly," Nedzu hums, but he sounds unconvinced.

"Speaking of," Shouta says. "Overhaul's trial is tentatively scheduled for February. Dr Shinsou will be called on as a subject matter expert.

Myself and several other Pros present during the raid are expected to be as well.”

Nedzu purses his lips. “We’ll need to prepare for cross-examination. If I may offer my services?”

Shouta nods in concession. Nedzu’s right. They’ll need to get their story straight with regards to explaining away Shouta’s *anonymous tip*. It’s one thing to lie to reporters--where information gaps can be glossed over and sensationalized with rumor--but it’s another thing to lie in a court of law, where those same gaps are all that stand between a lifetime sentence and Overhaul walking free.

The three of them trade looks in unspoken agreement. It will hardly be the first time--or last time--any of them have lied on the stands in their Hero careers. The irony doesn’t escape him, but the necessity more than outweighs it.

On his way out, Toshinori joins him. Shouta stifles a grimace - he had hoped to be done with covert parking lot conversations, but then, he's never been that lucky.

UA is as polished and meticulous as the city is filthy - the sun gleaming off the tall windows, spilling pools of warmth across the campus. They stroll through the fields in step, past the stadium, towards the main gates, newly rebuilt since the attack just two months prior.

“You look good,” Shouta says, eyeing the way Toshinori keeps up with only minimal wheezing. “Enjoying your break from the students?”

Toshinori gives a weak smile. “I am, yes. Though I confess, I don’t have much else to occupy me these days. Not like you seem to. You’re a very busy man.”

Shouta concedes him this. He doesn’t envy All Might’s sudden departure from the world stage. It must be disorienting, to be cast adrift without a mission, after so many years devoted to a single cause. “I get around,” he says evasively.

Toshinori is silent for a moment. Shouta doesn’t have to wonder

what's coming next.

"How long do you really think this can go on?"

He sighs. "I don't know, All Might. I hope not much longer."

"You *hope*."

Shouta shoots him a glare. "The League is preparing for a move right now. We can't go storming in until we have a *lock* on their location. That's the only way this thing ends. With Kurogiri and a fallback plan, they're untouchable. We think we have them surrounded, and we're wrong every time. We've seen it happen before."

"They're *always* going to have a fallback plan, Aizawa. We need an *extraction* plan." Toshinori plants himself in front of Shouta, forces him to stop walking, forces him to *look*. "Nedzu didn't mention Shinsou *once* today. You know him as well as I do - he thinks five steps ahead of everyone else's five steps ahead. He's got plans for your cross-examination on the witness stand, but he doesn't have a plan for Shinsou? That's because he doesn't *want* one. He doesn't want this to end."

"You think I don't know that?" Shouta snaps. "You think I don't know how absolutely fucked we are? We are--all of us--implicated in this. Not just Nedzu. Me, you, his mother. We all fell for it - we all let Shinsou go, let this whole thing go and go and go until it grew into something too big for any of us to stop alone." He breathes hard, reigns back control of himself, of his anger. "If we try an extraction plan and we fail, we put Shinsou at risk. We out him. And then what? With Kurogiri, they could take him *anywhere*. Hell, they could take him out of this damn country, and we'd have no idea."

They could kill him, rip him limb from limb, drag his body to the bottom of the ocean. Shouta's hands could drip with Hitoshi's blood, and he wouldn't even know it.

"A lock," he says. "We wait for a lock on their location. Then we get Shinsou out."

He leaves before Toshinori can work up any more self-righteous monologues, throws himself behind the whipcord of his weapon and into the city sky. He's halfway downtown before he remembers he's supposed to be on patrol and not senselessly sweating his anger out, and it's another few blocks before he convinces his body to slow, breath burning in his throat.

Morning bleeds into afternoon and the city picks up below, the streets spilling over. The new year is just days away - shops boasting all manner of end-of-year sales, preparations for feasts and festivities, decorated in strings of plum blossoms and dazzling electric lights. The grime of winter wipes away, by a fraction, and for once, Shouta stops to take in.

His eyes catch on a familiar splash of black and pink.

Uraraka meets his eye, even from four stories below. She *was* always far more perceptive than she let on - a solid choice for the internship with Ryuku. Shouta straightens from his crouch--no point trying to hide now--and gives a two-fingered salute.

He considers leaving it at that, but he hasn't had anything to eat or drink since his shared coffee with Haru this morning. Here's as good a place as any to hunt down a street vendor.

He makes a show of unspooling his weapon, preparing for the descent, to give Uraraka plenty of time to move along if she wants. Instead, she exchanges a few words with the costumed figure next to her--Hado Nejire, by the looks of it--and starts across the street to meet him.

"Sensei," she bobs her head in a bow.

He flicks his weapon to release it from the railings above. "Uravity."

Her ears flush at the title, as though she forgot they aren't at school.

"How's patrol?" he asks.

"Good," she says, and straightens, the picture of professional. "The trains along the Chuo Line were delayed due to an electrical failure. We informed those waiting at the station of the increased wait times and urged them to return to the heated shelters."

Ah, yes. The *glorious* boredom of patrol. He knows it all too well. "Where does your route take you?"

"We start at Minami Station and head east to the Saitama industrial yards, then on the return route we go through Shihori Park," Uraraka recites.

"Saitama," Shouta hums. "That's far."

She hesitates before answering, searches his face like isn't sure if he's

making fun of her. Shouta schools his expression into something serious, claps her shoulder and says, “Good job, recruit.”

He sends her on her way after that, shoots Hado a nod and watches until the neon hues of their costumes disappear into the crowd. They’ll be hungry for action--they always are, at their ages--but Shouta privately sends up a prayer that their patrol continue to be perfectly, *grossly* uneventful.

Not likely, with his students' track records, but hell. A man can dream.

“What, *really*?” Hagakure leans over the railings of the porch so far they creak from the weight, watching Hitoshi smoke in the garden below. There’s something like tension in the set of her shoulders, her voice tight in her throat.

“Yeah,” Hitoshi says breezily. “Toga’s so excited to see you, it’s crazy.” They all were, really, but Toga by far the most vocally. Their collective needling had chipped away at Kurogiri’s defense bit by bit, coupled with slanderous accusations about the disparity of Hitoshi’s special treatment.

“Just because you loooove him--”

“Alright, enough,” Kurogiri had all but thrown a hand over Toga’s mouth. “You’ve made your point, Himiko.”

Privately, Hitoshi finds the whole thing hilarious, but can’t say he’s not pleased when Kurogiri offers them his taxi services again. After all, he’s the one always preaching for them to act like a family.

He just thought Hagakure would have been happier to hear it.

“It’s just... They don’t even know me. I’ve never met them before.”

“Right,” Hitoshi says. “Spinner, Dabi, and Toga all joined after you’d started at UA, didn’t they?”

“Yeah.” Her posture deflates with a sigh, elbow propped up on the railing like she’s resting her chin in her hand. “I haven’t really visited much, since then. Except meetings with Kurogiri. And Giran, obviously.”

Hitoshi had figured as much - her intel drops are reserved for higher-ups, and the few of them who can easily get around in public. He stubs out his cigarette, considering. "I'll introduce you. Don't be nervous - like I said, they already love you."

"Yeah?"

"Of course." He smirks. "We're family, after all."

Turns out, Hitoshi needn't do much introducing. Toga sets her sights on Hagakure like a shark on blood, hooks an arm in hers and whisks her away before Kurogiri can even finish the perfunctory disclaimers.

"I know we're all excited, but I must remind you, Hagakure is under no circumstances to leave the facility. It's dangerous enough just--"

Hitoshi pats his arm in consolation. "Probably should have given that speech ahead of time, huh?"

Toga takes them from room to room, showing Hagakure off to anyone who will listen, face split with a manic grin. Hagakure gets her feet under her quick enough - it's only moments before they're trapezing around the base step-in-step. Hitoshi trails them from a few paces back, watches as Hagakure relaxes in increments, settles into the pace, morphs herself to Toga until they all but speak with the same voice. She's good at matching other people's energies - bubbly, eager, inviting. Impossibly likeable.

They gather a crowd by the time Toga leads them down into the warehouse floor. Hagakure pauses over the washed-out bloodstains that litter the concrete, the newly-installed crash mats Kurogiri insisted they start using, the shelves now permanently pushed against the walls to make space for their makeshift training grounds.

"And this," Toga says with a flourish, "is where we habitually kick Hitoshi's ass."

"Guilty," Dabi says.

Hagakure stares, utterly inscrutable. Hitoshi can't help but picture the discrepancy - from the blinding lights and state-of-the-art battle tech

of USJ, to this. A dirty factory floor, tin walls sweating mould and mildew.

“Awesome,” Hagakure says, the venom of her grin audible. “When do I get to turn?”

With her gloves and shoes off, Hagakure’s a veritable ghost, all quick jabs and whispered laughter. She’s playing with him, not aiming to hurt, just piss him off - a pinch on his arm, a sharp tug on the back of his air.

“Come on, what are you hiding for?” he growls. “Why don’t you come out where I can-- Oh, wait. That’s right, you *can’t*.”

She doesn’t fall for any of his taunts, lips sealed not to give away her location. He turns in a slow circle, head cocked for sound, and *there--*

He spins, arcs an arm in a wide swipe that hits *something*, but she pulls back before he can pin her. He makes another swing in the same direction, and stumbles when he meets empty air. She’s long gone.

A hoot of encouragement from the sidelines. “Kick his ass!” Spinner shouts, ever the fan.

Hitoshi tunes him out, berates himself to focus. He feels blind, distinctly off balance, tempted to just start pinwheeling his arms and see what hits.

There, in the corner of his vision, a scuff in the dust. The concrete floor darkens in the unmistakable shape of a sweaty footprint. He pretends not to see it, makes another slow circle, a show of weakness.

He waits - hears a scuff and doesn’t move for the opening, but anticipates the one she takes instead. He pivots and shoots out a fist, hits solid flesh and hears the telltale grunt of the air leaving her stomach.

“Ooh, did you get her?” Toga calls. “I literally can’t see shit.”

Hagakure regroups, comes in low in a tackle that’s all invisible limbs and revenge, and even Toga can’t miss the way Hitoshi’s face meets the concrete.

“The mats, *please*,” Kurogiri says. “They’re there for a reason.”

Hagakure rockets to her feet, an invisible hand dragging Hitoshi up alongside her. “You’re good,” she says. “It was the footprints, wasn’t it?”

“They’re a *little* sweaty,” he admits.

“Ugh,” she cringes. “So embarrassing.”

Toga’s patience meets its end - she struts onto the floor, grin wild and knives flashing, and summons *Compress* of all people to her side. “Two against two,” she announces. “Come on, I wanna see some real action from the newbies.”

Compress sheds his overcoat and rolls his shoulders, face sober, almost *regretful*. It doesn’t take a tactical genius to know Hitoshi’s about to get his ass kicked.

Hagakure seems to have reached the same conclusion. She clasps his arm. “It was an honour to know you.”

To their credit, he and Hagakure last a resounding sixty seconds the first round, and about half as long the second. Compress isn’t an enemy he’s ever fought before, usually opting to sit out the warehouse-wide sparring sessions, and Hitoshi eagerly soaks up the defeat, hungry for a chance to watch the man in action.

He’s lithe beneath the trenchcoat, long-limbed and surprisingly acrobatic. Solid hand-to-hand, but it’s certainly not his preference - he lets Toga take point, stepping in only to take on Hitoshi or Hagakure one at a time, then retreating to wait out the next opening. It almost reminds him of Aizawa.

As they regroup for their third round, Hitoshi catches Hagakure’s arm, and feels her freeze under the touch. He plants his eyes somewhere in the vicinity of her face, and he can only hope she meets the stare, then pointedly flicks his gaze in Compress’ direction.

They take off at the same time. Hitoshi ducks the first swipe from Toga, rolls to his feet and keeps running, focus pinned on their shared target. He loses track of Hagakure and makes sure Compress does too, puts on a show of circling him from the left, feinting in for a strike that Compress easily blocks.

He isn’t so lucky with the invisible kick that comes from behind,

catching him off guard. Compress spins, too late to catch her, and there's a whirl of limbs as struggles to fend off her next attack. Hitoshi spares a glance for Toga--only feet away now--and realizes they're out of time.

He leaps, graceless and desperate, wraps his arms around Compress' neck and kicks out the backs of his knees, sending them both sprawling.

"Well," Compress pants from beneath him. "I wouldn't call that a clean win. But certainly effective."

"It wasn't a win at all!" Spinner says. "You'd have marbleized him in a second if you'd actually been trying."

Compress rises, adjusting his collar. "Now, let's not detract from Hagakure and Shinsou's commendable efforts. It was a wonderful use of... falling."

Hitoshi stands, and feels an unseen hand land on his shoulder. "Well, *I* thought it was a great strategy." Then, more quietly, "But for the record, if that had been a real fight, I definitely would have left you to die at the end there."

Hitoshi grins. "Ah, but you see, I was sacrificing myself for you."

"But of course," she laughs. "My hero."

They switch up the teams - Hitoshi and Spinner prove an abysmal pair, and Hagakure and Toga more deadly than anyone was prepared for. Even Twice joins in, briefly, in a one-on-one against Dabi, which quickly turns into a two-on-one, then a four-on-one, and ends with walls bathed in scorch-marks and puddles of disintegrating corpses.

"So... did Dabi just kill that guy?" Hagakure whispers.

Hitoshi shrugs. "Don't overthink it."

Afterwards, drenched with sweat and trembling from the adrenaline crash, Hitoshi shows Hagakure to the bathroom stalls. Rusted old pipes line the walls, the tattered remains of moulded shower curtains offering little privacy. Hitoshi's bad wrist aches from another fall--he

really should stop going up against Dabi--and he gingerly runs it under the spout, the icy water soothing the sprain.

As he does, he catches himself in the mirror, stunned for a moment by the unfamiliar sight. Skinny and sunken-eyed from rough days and late nights, hair shaggy and plastered to his skin where it used to stick up in untameable spikes, his lip swollen and bruised from where Spinner got in a good hit--which he will almost certainly never hear the end of. But beneath the grimy exterior, he's still wearing the ghost of a smile, wild-eyed and flushed from exertion.

There's movement behind him as Hagakure reappears, the outline of her body once again visible beneath her clothes. He shuts off the spout and turns in time to see her fold up the shimmering, nearly invisible outline of her costume.

"That's so cool," he says. "Support department made that?"

"Yeah! They had to order the fabric in special from some crazy lab in America."

He whistles. "Hero Course perks."

"Oh, shut up," she laughs, and he can practically hear the eye-roll. "Real villain perks."

"What are you talking about? You're not a *real* villain?"

"Not like you," she sighs, wistful. "Shinsou, what you're doing is incredible. You're making a real difference. People are *listening* to the League now, to their message, to wanting to expose the flaws in hero society. All I've ever done is work from the shadows, but you - you're standing by your truth, publicly, proudly. You're standing in the *sun*. And people are seeing you."

Hitoshi's throat closes up around a hot rush of shame. He feels it threaded like a wire through his chest, burning and heavy, the roots of it curling down his arms and into his fingers.

"I mean, you could too," he offers weakly.

"And risk losing my spot at UA?" she scoffs. "Yeah, I don't think so. The League needs me there."

"But do you *like* it there?"

She shrugs. "It's where I'm most useful. Covert work."

"Deception," he translates.

"I mean, *yeah*. People might see *through* me, but no one ever sees through me, you know?" The joke falls flat, and Hagakure sighs. "Like it or not, it's a liar's quirk. That's what I'm good for."

God, Hitoshi wishes he could *see* her - if she's looking at him, looking away. If she looks resigned, or firm in her determination. What does she need from him? Sympathy? Validation? Righteous anger? He can muster none of it. Only a hollow, aching recognition.

"You know, it's funny. I think I know more about UA than I even do about the League," she says. "Hell, I didn't even know this place *existed* until a couple of days ago. They've kept me on the outskirts for so long."

Hitoshi knows the feeling well - the sense of betrayal, of loneliness. Being *sick* with anger when he found out about the heist, found out they were trying to hide it from him. The memory passes like a flicker, and all he can feel now is the old sting of embarrassment. *Half in the dark*.

"It's not that they don't trust you--"

"I know, I know." She shakes her head. "Trust me, I get it. I'm the closest to the heroes and the most likely to be caught, so they don't want me at risk of giving everything away if I get questioned."

Hitoshi frowns, stomach churning at the unspoken insinuation. "The heroes wouldn't-- They wouldn't *hurt* you, though. If they caught you."

Hagakure blows out a sharp breath. "You say that now, but we all know they talk a big game about justice and hardly ever follow it through." Her voice is brittle. *Angry*. Angrier than he's ever heard.

"You really think that?"

There's a pause. He can *feel* her eyes on him - sunk in like claws, burrowing beneath his skin. "You don't?"

He wavers. Why the hell is he being so *risky* right now? He'd be standing in his grave if his foot weren't already planted in his mouth. He bites his lip, tries, "Can I ask you something?"

“Sure,” she says slowly. “I guess since we’re already playing *traitor’s confidant* here.”

“Your friends at UA, the other students...” he starts, stops. Shakes his head. “How do you do it? How do you keep them separate from everything?”

Hagakure is quiet for a long time, shoulders curved as if beneath a great weight. “They *are* my friends,” she says softly, like a confession. “How could they not be? I live with them. And... I *feel* for them. They’re just as much victims of hero society as the rest of us - child soldiers raised to believe that a system so corrupt is unquestionable.” Her voice trembles. “They’re like a second family to me.”

“What about your first family?” he asks.

“What about them?”

“What do they think of all this?”

“They don’t know.”

He stares. Blinks. “Oh.”

“They’re not dead, if that’s what you’re asking,” Hagakure says quickly. “I’m emancipated, actually. According to all public records, I now live with my *uncle*.”

Hitoshi feels his stomach drop through his feet, a sickening lurch of realization as all the pieces click into place. Of course they would have needed a cover, so as not to arouse suspicion within UA. And Giran’s not a known villain - not known to the public anyway, or by anything other than his alias moniker. So then it’s not a ploy. He has *legal* custody.

“You can ask,” Hagakure says.

But he doesn’t even know *what* to ask, how to formulate it all into a single question. The words rattle around in his head, loose cogs struggling to fall together. “How did you *get* here?”

“The same way as you,” and she sounds so *tired* suddenly, weary, a pale shadow of the bright voice and quick steps she usually wears. “I was made to believe I was a liar. Villainous, according to a definition beyond my power to change. I was given that label the day my quirk developed. So I finally decided to prove it right.”

“But you’re a *hero*,” he sputters.

Hagakure sucks in a long breath. “My family. My-- my dad. He was a hero,” she says flatly.

“I-- I didn’t know,” Hitoshi says.

“Low-level, local. Very celebrated in the town where I grew up, but not much outside it. Everybody loved him back home. But it-- It got too much. The bloodshed, the casualties. He’d come home from missions just... a *shell* of a person. Miserable, angry. And he’d drink. Smoke. Stuff I couldn’t even *name*. ” Her voice is shuttered, utterly void of emotion, factual and distant. “And he used to hit me.”

Hitoshi’s breath stutters. His eyes slip closed of their own volition, nausea swimming in waves behind his ribs.

“I told my mom, once. Just once. And she didn’t believe me. Thought I was doing it for attention. I remember she said, *Tooru, enough with the lies. Show me, then. Go on, show me the bruise.*” She sniffs, once, then pulls herself out of it with a practiced exhale. “She was sure I was lying. Why wouldn’t I, when it came to me so easily?”

“You must be evil,” Hitoshi says quietly. “Because your quirk is.”

She was just a kid. Branded not by her actions, but by what they *could* be.

“I’m sorry,” is all he can think to say. It feels pathetic, utterly lacking - but what else is there? What else could possibly put a voice to the pain of what she’s been through?

She shrugs, the up-down of invisible shoulders, skin that carried so much weight but could never show the bruises, that for years had no one to share it with. No one but a League of outcasts - broken and bruised people, just like her.

“Don’t be. I got mine. I think my mom even believed me, in the end. Dad was discharged years ago,” she says. “The retirement fund ran out with all his gambling, and my mom left him not long after.” There’s a wry twist in her voice, bitter with regret. “And to think she used to be so worried about his reputation. His legacy. As a *hero*.”

Hitoshi’s chest throbs with a hollow, ringing ache, like a storm has passed through him, leaving him cold and damp and shaking from the memory of something terrible. How long did she carry that, that *pain* ,

alone, told by all the world that the person who hurt her most was worthy of praise and glory, and she herself nothing more than a liar, bitter and resentful in the shadow of his supposed greatness?

“What about you?” she says suddenly. “How’d you end up here?”

“I’m... I’m sure you saw the news.” Hitoshi wrings the words out of himself, too drained to even think up a lie.

“Sure, I saw what happened. But *how*?”

“It’s like you said. I got fed up with it - the hypocrisy, the lies.” The branding - brainwasher, traitor, villain.

“What do your parents think?”

Fuck. What *does* mom think? Does dad even *know*?

“Well, my dad left us when I was, I don’t know, six or seven?” He hardly remembers the man, really - just flashes, memories without shape or substance, blurred with age. He was too young for it to stick, at the time. All these years later, it just doesn’t seem worth complaining about anymore. “My mom was always good to me. I mean, she works a lot. She’s a doctor, so long hours. But I wasn’t neglected or anything. I... I honestly don’t know how she’s taking all this, what she must be thinking. I see her on the news sometimes, but she-- she won’t talk to them.”

“I used to wonder if my mom even missed me,” Hagakure admits softly. “I bet yours does.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you miss her?”

“Yeah,” he manages again, weakly.

“Do you... ever wish you could go back?”

He pauses, eyes flickering to meet hers, stuttering when they remember there’s nothing there to find. And *god*, how does he even begin to answer that without giving himself away? He feels like a thread pulled loose, in danger of unraveling himself to his core, right here on the floor of the League of Villains hideout.

What if-- What if it’s all a ruse, a test planted by Shigaraki? What if she’s just been playing him this whole time, clever words masked in

false pain, calculating gaze inscrutable, invisible?

No. He severs the thought. She wouldn't. She *could*, but she wouldn't. Just because she *could*, it doesn't mean--

"Sometimes," he admits.

"Me too," she says, and the words break open, a flood of relief. "Isn't that fucked up?" She laughs, brokenly. "Not back to mom and dad, but... As crazy as it sounds, UA's the closest I've ever had to a normal life. Friends, family."

"Then why are you still here?" The words tumble out in a rush. "You could go back, turn yourself in."

"What are you talking about?" she snaps, voice once more hollow and cold.

"I just-- I mean," he stutters. "You weren't publicly outed as a villain like me. You could go back."

"Are you kidding? The League would *kill* me."

Hitoshi wavers. "Have they ever... hurt you?"

"No," she says quickly. "No, never. But I-- I'd hate to think what they'd do to someone who betrayed them."

Hitoshi swallows back a knot of dread, feels it settle like ice in his chest. "The heroes would protect you, if you told them everything."

"No."

"But--"

"No. Stop. Just stop. We shouldn't even be having this conversation," she spits. "I've made my choice. I made it a long time ago. The damage I've caused - the people whose *lives* I've endangered? I can't just come back from that. I can't pretend I didn't do it." She breathes hard, steadies herself as if piece by brittle piece. The silence stretches.

He hears her move, feels her settle at his side. The touch of her fingers against his wrist. "Look, you don't have to feel bad for me, okay? I don't want your pity, and I certainly don't deserve it." She laughs, and like a switch flipped, the smile is back in her voice, working the words into something bright and warm. "I actually find it kind of insulting. Don't forget - I kicked your ass out there."

Hitoshi breathes, packs up the sorrow in his chest and lets the exhale push it from his lungs like a breath of smoke. “Oh, don’t worry. I’m sure Spinner will remind me for *years* to come.”

“Speaking of, we should get back out there. Toga’s gonna get jealous if we spend any more time without her.”

Hitoshi smirks, projects nothing but a practiced calm. “I *told* you she was excited to meet you.”

The invisible touch leaves his arm, taking with it the comfort of her presence at his side, tearing back open the distance between them, the space between her shadow and his light - *I can’t just come back from that. I can’t pretend I didn’t do it.*

No, Hitoshi thinks. She couldn’t.

But she could be forgiven.

Chapter End Notes

The conversation between Hitoshi and Hagakure is one of my absolute favourite moments in this fic, and was one of the earliest planned scenes during the drafting process.

Hagakure’s backstory and motivations in this story are very important to me, and as a character who’s received such little development in-canon, I felt it fair and necessary to take some big creative liberties with her. I will always aim to keep things realistic and respectful in addressing her childhood in a home with PTSD, addiction, neglect & abuse.

Family law in Japan is very complicated and I am by no means an expert. Suffice to say that in the alternate universe / nebulous future in which the BNHA-verse takes place, she was able to file for custody transfer during her parent’s divorce.

Also - she has a hero costume that allows her to be invisible. I refuse to believe she runs around naked. I will not be taking questions on this matter.

Comments & kudos are appreciated, as always!

A Stranger

Chapter Notes

Many of you have picked up on it, but we are rapidly nearing the end of Part 2. We have a few big set pieces left as we move into the finale, and I'm super excited to share them with you guys.

Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoy!

New Year's Eve rolls in like thunder, bringing with it the drum of fireworks and distant smells of street market festivals. The League celebrates the occasion in their usual style, with violent affection and dangerous amounts of liquor, their soon-to-be obsolete headquarters awash in the lights and sounds of gambling, drinking games, and horrifically off-key singing.

At some point during the night, Kurogiri teleports in an old billiards table from god-knows-where, to be met with thunderous applause. Twice takes the opportunity to regain his champion title, lost since the ashes of Mountainside, in a tournament so long it takes nearly three hours, ending at last with wounded egos, splintered pool cues, and at least two pairs of split lips.

To Hitoshi's surprise, even Hagakure is allowed to join - though she, like him, makes the wise decision to sit out the tournament. He's *pretty* sure she even spends the night, though he's drunk enough by the end that he can't be sure. She is *awfully* hard to keep track of in a room full of people, even at the best of times.

His suspicions are confirmed the next morning when he wakes, cotton-mouthed and ears ringing, and crawls out of the night's wreckage only to stumble into her.

"Hey," he says, and winces at the sound of his own voice. He clears his throat, tries again, "You're up early."

"Classes start at 8. What's your excuse?"

He grimaces. "Just unlucky, I guess."

In the kitchen, Hitoshi drinks straight from the tap, lets the cool, metallic taste soothe his throat and raging headache. Afterwards, feeling several degrees more human, he pulls down a mismatched set

of mugs and sets a kettle to boil.

“You held up pretty well last night,” Hagakure tells him. “Or at least, you weren’t nearly as drunk as Spinner.”

Hitoshi rubs his neck, embarrassed. Even at his worst, he never drinks as much as the others. Or at least, he tries not to. It was a learning curve at first, but these days, he’s got a pretty good idea of his limits, and how to pretend to have surpassed them. “Eh, the trick is to go slow.”

She hums. “You guys do that a lot, then?”

Hitoshi gives her a *look*. “The first time I met Giran he made me take a shot of whiskey.”

“What?” she gives a startled laugh, voice sharp and bright in the quiet. “Seriously?”

The kettle whistles, and Hitoshi busies himself pouring. “Yeah, I think it was an induction ritual or something.” He grins and passes her the mug like he’s sharing a secret. “Honestly? I thought he was super intimidating, at the time.”

He still does, actually. Giran *is* pretty terrifying, his relationship with Hagakure notwithstanding.

“He’s really not. He acts all cool and mysterious, but he’s just a boring, rich old man. I make fun of him for it all the time.”

“Yeah, I’ll be sure to try that next time I see him.” Hitoshi aims a flat look her way. “And I hope you’ll be nice enough to say some kind words at my funeral afterwards.”

Hagakure snorts. “He’s not going to kill you. Kurogiri wouldn’t let him, anyway.”

Hitoshi raises his mug, hides his smile behind a careful sip. “If you say so.”

He feels a nudge, and looks up to see Hagakure doing that *thing*, the one where he *knows* she’s looking at him. His eyes flicker about for something to meet, some unseen point of connection, before eventually settling back on the mug in his hands.

“Thank you, Shinsou.”

He frowns. "For what?"

"For working your magic on Kurogiri," she says, and the sincerity in her voice roots him in place. "I know you convinced him to let me spend the break with you guys. He was so worried at the start, with all the close calls the League has had recently. And I would have been happy to do my part and stay in Iwate, if that's what he wanted but... All the same, it's been nice to see you. All of you."

The words set lines of heat across his skin, warm and familiar, but coiled with something oddly like regret.

She's been doing this ever since their conversation in the locker room. Most of the time it's normal between them--jokes about the League or shared memories from UA--but every now and then, when they're alone, she springs on him with bouts of vulnerability, confessions of fear, declarations of gratitude, solidarity, hope.

Hitoshi's not sure what to make of it. On one hand, he can't say he's not touched by her apparent trust in him, but he knows that despite all outward appearances, he hasn't earned it. The last thing he wants is to cause her any more pain or confusion, but the only methods available to relieve it all come at the cost of sinking her deeper into the League's web.

"You too," he says, and means it. "I'm really glad we met."

Hitoshi knows their remaining time together is short, and his time with the rest of the League not much longer. Winter break ends in two days, and Hagakure's set to leave for UA tomorrow night. In a perfect world, Hitoshi would leave after her and arrive before her--god forbid she were to somehow spot him on campus before he managed to find Nedzu or Aizawa--but that leaves him a slim window of availability.

Which means *Plan Get the Hell Out of Here* is officially a go.

He's been laying the groundwork all week, taking his smoke breaks in different parts of the warehouse and surrounding lot to try to get a better idea of his escape route.

Smoke stacks to the south point towards the heart of Saitama's industrial yards, which means if he heads north he should be moving into denser, civilian territory. He knows he's at least an hour or two from downtown Musutafu, and now more than ever does he wish he had kept up with his running. Not that he expects to be *chased*, but he'll need to move fast.

But before he can worry about the race, he needs to make it to the starting line.

There's about fifty meters of open parking lot, without cover, from the edge of the building to the ten-foot tall barbed wire fence that surrounds the lot. If he goes through the loading bay doors, he avoids most of the second-story windows, and under cover of night, he's confident he can make the run undetected. The fence might give him some trouble, but a few scrapes are a small price to pay for freedom.

Once he's over the fence, he need only creep along the perimeter, then it's only another thirty feet or so across the road to the cover of shipyard crates and buildings. The second his feet touch that ground, all bets are off. There's no way he can pretend it was an accident - if the League finds him there, they'll know what his intentions were.

But if he makes it, he's free. Once he's out of the industrial yards and into the city proper, it's just a matter of blending into the crowd well enough that no one calls the cops on his ass.

And then-- Well. And then UA, he supposes. And then Aizawa. And then it's *over*.

He hasn't really thought much beyond that point. He knows it won't be that easy - he managed to turn the whole world against him in a matter of months. A resume of bank heists and political terrorism doesn't exactly turn heads for the right reasons. There's going to be fallout to deal with, of course. There's going to be consequences.

There's going to be Hagakure.

That's where his thoughts start to stutter - start to turn less calculated, less clean. The whole *point* of this was Hagakure, he knows. He *knows*. And yet, there's a part of him--an incurable, inconsolable part--that almost wants to pretend he *didn't* find her out.

It's impossible, and stupid, and would definitely earn him a slap upside the head if Aizawa were around to hear it. If they don't bring her in, then she goes back to the League, then they disappear off to the next base, then he's lost her for good. Him at UA and her with the League, a world of distance between them, and it'll be like nothing ever changed.

But she'd seemed so... not remorseful, maybe, but almost *mournful* the other day. *I can't just come back from that. I can't just pretend I didn't do it.* And she can't, it's true. None of them can.

But he thinks he could convince her to try. He thinks that maybe, if she saw him go back, if she saw him be *welcomed* back, even after everything, every mistake and reckless decision, maybe she'd realize she could do the same.

It's a pipe dream, and not something he can afford to concern himself with yet. But he thinks Aizawa will understand, that maybe the two of them can figure it out together.

It's not always about fighting, Aizawa had said, all those months ago. It's not always that easy.

There's more than one way to be a hero.

His mission has changed, not for the first time since this whole thing started. It's not about catching the traitor anymore. He wants to help her.

She'll be angry, when he turns on her, but over time, he'll show her that he understands, that he's *like* her, that it wasn't *all* a lie. That they can use their quirks for good. That they can change people's minds. That there's more than one way to be a hero.

First, he just has to make it out of here alive.

Evening falls to a far calmer scene, most of the League still recovering from the night prior. There's a small gathering in the lounge, cards and plotting and casual drinks - Toga and Twice, Compress and Spinner. No Shigaraki, and no Kurogiri either, to his disappointment, but Magne and Dabi come and go as the hours slip by.

Hitoshi drifts to the edge of the room like a receding tide, plays along just enough to shrug off any lingering attention, and cracks a solid yawn to lay the foundation for his early retirement.

He feels unusually subdued, not so much nervous as just... muted. There can be no farewell, no explanation, no grand reveal or daring escape. He will simply slip away, unnoticed, until this night is nothing but a footnote in his memory, the people he left behind nothing but ghosts, himself once more a stranger.

He sits beside them, for the last time, and really *looks*, looks in at what they've created here. A small room in a derelict warehouse - hardly the high tech, tightly guarded secret hideout the media would have him speculate about. They're scrappy, protective of each other and what little they have in this world. They fight too often and they drink too much and they hold each other together - some in subtle ways, others more overtly. Some are here for the glory, for the thrill of the fight, others for the dogma, for the cause. Some are here because they simply have nowhere else to go, because they've been hurt, cheated by a system that forced them into an unwanted role.

He sits, one step outside himself, outside of them, and thinks how easily he had sat among them. How easily he could have *really* sat among them.

And he quietly takes his leave.

The streets are dim and gray, painted under the long shadows of evening, and broken only by the occasional buzzing streetlamp and neon glare of shop window signs declaring themselves closed for the holiday season.

New Years passed in the blink of an eye, an explosion of light and sound, plum blossoms strung over doorways, midnight bells and distant fireworks that marked the city in a brilliant, multi-coloured glow, and left it washed out of anything resembling life.

"Quiet tonight, huh?" Ochako says, and kicks at a loose pebble to watch it tumble down the empty street.

Next to her, Hado squeaks out a yawn, looking somewhat haggard herself. Ochako doesn't ask, but she has a strong suspicion Hado was out late herself these last few nights, and not because of patrol.

"Maybe everyone's staying in to finish up all the schoolwork they forgot to do," Hado says.

Ochako shrugs. It's certainly a possibility. She herself still has a couple of last minute edits to make on her essay for Modern Lit, and a whole sheet of algebra questions she hasn't even *touched*. Not that she did any partying over the break - she spent every night on patrol, even

picking up overtime shifts from the other interns who went home for the holidays or, like Hado, simply wanted to enjoy a night off for once.

They're nearing the end of the route, moving into the seedier parts of Saitama that normally earn them wary--if not outright hostile--stares from the locals. Tonight, however, the scariest thing they encounter are a couple of rats chittering over a discarded grocery bag.

Ochako's only vaguely familiar with this part of town. Her dad used to work construction on a nearby shipping yard, but a recession swept through the region a few years ago, and most of the places have been abandoned ever since. Nowadays, it's mostly a dumping ground for industrial overstock.

"Well, I think we can probably stop here, eh?" Hado drawls, and rolls her shoulders in a lazy stretch. "You okay if we split?"

Ochako glances around. They're not technically supposed to split up until they've made it back to the agency, but Hado's right. It's nearly 10 o'clock, and they've got classes in the morning, and she's *tired*, for god's sake, her joints stiff from the cold. Ugh, she feels like *Aizawa*.

"Okay," Ochako concedes. "I'm heading back toward Shihori Park anyway, I can just finish the route myself."

"Aw, you're the best," Hado flashes a grin, already powering up her quirk in preparation to take flight. "I'll see you around campus, yeah?"

"Yep, see you." Ochako gives a wave, and watches as she takes off without another word, trails of golden light behind her like the tail of a shooting star.

Ochako sighs. Hado's an upperclassman, with more experience under her belt than a student her age should have any right to, but she's still just that - a student, like the rest of them - overworked and underpaid.

Left alone, Ochako ducks her head and picks up her pace, already cataloguing everything she needs to when she gets home. She's got to get up early tomorrow to take the train, and god, she hasn't even finished *packing* yet.

Her mental checklist cuts short at a sudden crash - the sound of metal against concrete. She almost keeps her head down and walks right

past--usual city-faring instinct--before she remembers that she is technically supposed to be on patrol.

She stops, ear cocked, and catches the telltale mutter of a curse, the sound of someone stumbling over whatever was surely just knocked over.

She turns, catches movement in the deep shadows of the alleyway to her left. The outline of a person, breathing heavily.

“Are you okay?” she calls, cautiously.

The figure goes rigid, like a rope pulled taut, breath catching audibly. But they don't speak.

Alarm bells sound in her head. Her eyes skip over the scene - the hunched posture, the tense set of their shoulders. They're scared. They're *hiding*.

She steps forward. “Do you need help?”

The person startles like a frightened animal, scrambles backwards where the alley empties out into the street behind them, and there, illuminated in the dim, flickering glow of the streetlamp, she sees it. Sees *him*.

Shinsou Hitoshi.

The Sacrifice

Chapter Notes

A clarification of last chapter's Author's Notes, which I believe in hindsight were slightly misleading - though we are closing in on the end of Part 2, this fic will in fact have a third and final part, likely ending somewhere upwards of 160k words.

Specific content warning for this and the next chapter:

This chapter marks a departure in the story with regards to the level of threat facing our protagonist and other young characters. The threat of physical violence is very high in the next two chapters, and the tone of the writing will change to reflect this. I will keep explicit, on-screen violence to a minimum wherever possible, but if this is something that disturbs you, please take care when reading.

As always, thank you for reading and for your patience between chapters.

Hitoshi slips into the hall, eyes low and steps purposefully calm as the voices from the lounge drift into oblivion. The warehouse yawns open before him and in the mental map behind his eyes, deceptively empty. The darkness beckons, nothing but the creak of rusted metal and the steady drip of a leaking pipe in the rafters above, daring him to mar the silence.

He stops by his room first, grabs his coat and a pack of smokes, and casts a final gaze over the measly belongings that have become all he owns. There's nothing to miss. No gifts of belonging, no trophies to mark his successes, nothing to prove he was ever here at all.

He moves through the rest of the halls with that same clinical, detached feeling - slipping through shadows that hang heavier where he knows the lights are broken, dodging the stairs that groan, the hinges that creak. He avoids the open, echoing hull of the factory floor altogether, and takes a fire escape instead, crawling down just outside the loading bay doors.

The lot is pitched under the cover of night, distorted by the broken lampposts and piles of scrap metal that dot the terrain. They creak in the wind, carrying distant sounds of traffic, and *shit*, they really are so close to the city. An infestation hidden right in the heart. A blessing,

for once. Thank *god* they aren't at Mountainside anymore.

Hitoshi breathes, long and low, feels the cold burn in his lungs and cloud on the exhale, and breaks into a sprint.

He makes it to the fence easy enough - it's rickety and slick with frost, but sturdy enough to hold his weight as he starts to climb. He hesitates over the tangle of barbed wire at the top, picks his way carefully closer until he finds a clear knot of wire, grips it and *lifts* , arms straining to prop his torso over. His legs give him more trouble, dangling behind him and leaving him draped over the top of the fence with his ass in the air.

He grunts, lifts a leg and feels it catch on a barb - the press of the metal through fabric a warning, not yet enough to pierce the skin. He freezes like a fish caught on a hook, lowers down and inches to the left to try again.

The second attempt is no more graceful, and Hitoshi hisses when the wire bites into his knee instead. A backwards glance reveals the warehouse - a pillar of stony silence against the thrum of his pulse. But he can't afford to waste time. He climbs on, jerking free with a muffled swear. The barb slices his shin, but Hitoshi's got enough leverage now to pitch himself over the side, legs kicking free over his head.

He scrambles to catch himself before gravity takes him, hears the clang and rattle of the fence as it strains from the effort, before he gets enough purchase to lower himself safely.

The carnage is clear even under the cover of night - a tear in his jeans from knee to ankle, the skin beneath hot and slick with blood. There's nothing to be done for it, though. He packages the mental image and stuffs it away like a dusty box in an old attic, lets adrenaline steal the pain long enough to make it to the other side of the street. Finally, he pauses, crouched low and cold with sweat, eyes roving the dark for cover.

He doesn't need to go far. There's a narrow alley ahead, enough to shelter him from the view of the base. He makes it all the way to the mouth of the alley before his leg gives its first real cry of protest and he stumbles. His foot catches on a bit of exposed piping, and it clangs loose, tumbling across the concrete.

" *Shit.* " He steadies himself, fingers slipping on brick damp with mildew.

"Are you okay?" a voice calls. Young. Close.

He freezes, pulse rocketing to his ears. That voice - no, there's *no fucking way*--

"Do you need help?"

His vision blurs across the outline of Uraraka Ochako's hero costume, peering into the alley. Panic blooms like an explosion behind his ribs, a deep-rooted instinct that has him scurrying back like she could burn him, stumbling over numb feet. She follows into the mouth of the alley, then locks in place, the whites of her eyes stark, wide in realization.

"Wait," he gasps, "I'm on your side."

She closes the distance, a streak of colour that *flies* through the air and lands with a fist against his jaw, and Hitoshi's vision goes white. He staggers, and barely rights his feet before she's on him with the full weight of her body.

He hits pavement and feels it punch the breath from his lungs, and suddenly she's straddling him, pinning him in place

"Help!" she shrieks, and punches him again. "Hado!" Her voice bounces down the alley, echoing in the empty night. "Help!"

Hitoshi writhes beneath her, pulls an arm free and gets an elbow up to shield his face. "Wait," he pleads. They're no more than a few hundred feet from the warehouse. If anyone were to crack a window or step outside-- "Stop, *stop* , listen to me!"

She's still shouting, the wail of her voice a *siren* , and the panic erupts, instinct taking over. He grabs her wrists and jerks them over his head so that she falls, flush against him, then digs his toes into the cement and lifts his hips to send her sprawling over his head. It's a move Toga's used countless times, usually with far more grace, but it's enough to knock her loose. He surges up, scrambles over her and plants a knee in her back, twisting her arms behind her. "Would you fucking listen to me?" he hisses, and coats the words in power. "I'm on your side."

Her mouth stays shut, teeth clenched in a growl as she twists. She snakes an arm loose--he thinks to try to hit him again--but instead plants the tips of her fingers against the skin of his wrist.

His stomach gives a sickening lurch as he's suddenly floating, rising as if lifted by an invisible tide. He shouts and flails. No longer pinned, Uraraka stands and shakes loose the hands now fisted into her shirt for purchase.

There's a shout--his name, he thinks--and his vision spins with weightlessness, with *fear*, eyes flitting to a mass of black shadow spilling across the street.

No. No.

The shadow stretches around them like the night itself come to life, blotting out the sky, yellowed eyes glowing in rage. Uraraka gasps, and Hitoshi could *scream*, but the breath deserts him, swallowed as the portal engulfs them both.

The cloud disperses like a crashing wave, spitting the three of them out over the warehouse floor. There's a scream, and one of the shelves tips over with a crash. Uraraka must lose concentration, because Hitoshi falls *hard*, tumbling across the concrete. He scrambles to his knees and finds Uraraka pinned, Kurogiri a vortex above her.

"Compress, *now!* "

There's a blur of black fog and Compress lunges from the dark, half-swallowed in a portal of his own. He plants his hands on Uraraka's struggling form and Hitoshi watches in pale, uncomprehending horror as her body begins to buckle and shrink, rounding in on itself, grotesque and terrifying until, in mere seconds, she's nothing more than a glassy, marble-sized bead.

He stares, chest heaving, the white noise of panic like a river, eroding all else. Someone's speaking, shouting - footsteps on the walkway above. But he can't move. He can't *think*. He's caught in the current, thoughts tumbling from reach like water through his fingers.

A hand on his chin, jerking his head above the surface. "What the *fuck* was that?" Compress demands.

Hitoshi blinks, vision shuttering into clarity. Kurogiri looms behind Compress, his body all sharp angles, the mask of his face stretched tight. "Shinsou, what happened? Are you alright?"

He can only nod, breath wheezing between his teeth. Compress drops his hold like he's disgusted by the sight and stalks off towards where more people have gathered at the base of the stairs. Toga, he thinks.

Maybe others. He doesn't dare look. "Are we under attack?"

"We're not sure," Kurogiri says slowly. "Is everyone here? Where's Hagakure?"

Hitoshi starts up. *Hagakure?*

"Shigaraki wanted to see her before she left." Compress picks up the marble, clenches it tight and doesn't let go. He glances from Kurogiri to Hitoshi, eyes lingering. "Twice, send a double after them. Get Shigaraki here. Now."

"But what's actually *happening*?" Toga demands.

Kurogiri shakes his head. "Shinsou had a run-in with a UA student outside. I'd just brought Hagakure in when I heard the shouting."

"What?" Spinner's fingers dance over the hilt of his blade. "How'd they find us?"

Compress' eyes haven't left Hitoshi's face. "Indeed, what were you doing outside?"

Hitoshi feels the stares like a scalpel, the sting of a wound threatening to split wide. He straightens and fumbles in his pockets for the cigarettes. "Smoke break," he finally manages. "I was outside and she-- She spotted me through the fence. Her quirk is-- antigravity, I think. She attacked, somehow floated us over it."

It's a pathetic excuse, and he knows it, and *they* know it, the words strung in the air like a noose, daring him to take one wrong step, to hang himself in its grip.

"Kurogiri." Shigaraki's voice rings out, shattering the moment. "What the hell is this?" He stands at the top of the stairs, red eyes narrowed and mouth twisted in a snarl. His hands twitch, skin exposed, blistered and raw. Hitoshi's eyes skip across him, cataloguing the threat, before they latch onto the faceless form at his back, soundless and still - a statue all but eclipsed in his presence.

His chest goes tight with nameless emotion - something halfway between terror and hope. She's still here .

"Shigaraki," Kurogiri says. "There was an incident outside the gate."

"A hero?" Shigaraki growls.

“A UA student.”

Shigaraki tilts his head, something strange and still coming over him. His gaze roves the room before he settles on Hitoshi with a long, crimson stare. “Was there anyone else there?”

Uraraka was screaming for help, as they'd fought. He doesn't remember the name she called, only the sound of it - desperate, terrified. “No,” he breathes. “No, it was just her.”

“It doesn't matter,” Kurogiri says. “We should relocate. We can't take another hit right now.”

“No,” Shigaraki says calmly. “Nobody leaves. We stay right here.”

Kurogiri frowns. “Shigaraki, if the heroes come looking--”

“Let them,” Shigaraki says. There's the barest hint of a smile - a flicker before it's gone, replaced with that same, expressionless calm. “Let them try. Let them send their best.” He turns to the rest of the room, voice raised. “No use travelling with dead weight. We stay, for now. Until she's no longer of use to us.”

The words roots in the pit of his stomach, sink through him like concrete tied to his feet, dragging down beneath the rushing white horror that swells over him. He's going to torture her. He's going to kill her.

“Twice, I want eyes on every corner,” Shigaraki says. “The rest of you, stay put. Nobody in, and nobody out. Compress, Kurogiri - with me.”

Compress nods, pockets the marble and starts up the stairs after him without another word. The others, too, take cue, carefully following lines in a script Hitoshi can't begin to stomach. Twice produces set after set of doubles, sends them marching off in every which direction. Toga checks over her blades. Dabi rolls fire across his knuckles in silent warning.

Only Kurogiri doesn't jump to command. He drifts closer, voice low. “Shinsou, are you alright?”

Hitoshi doesn't trust his voice, and only offers another nod. The vice around his throat tightens, and a chill races down his spine at Kurogiri's proximity. He's *scared*, he realizes. And he hasn't been, not of Kurogiri, not since that first day, when the fog had stolen him away, blackened his vision and suffocated his thoughts. He tries to

shake the memory, but the fear sits like ice in his chest, the cold and the panic and the water rising rising *rising* until tears suddenly spring in his eyes.

“Kurogiri,” Shigaraki snaps.

Kurogiri hesitates, gaze torn between them, his expression moving through some complicated process before it finally falls away behind a stern nod. He turns, and Hitoshi blinks furiously against the tears, watches him join the others, steps heavy on the walkway, until all three disappear deeper into the upper halls.

There’s a figure missing from the image - a space his eyes settle before he realizes it truly is empty now, and it’s only the sudden weight of a gaze at his back that has him turning to meet her.

Hagakure stands, still as a grave, her gloves wrung together in a knot. She’s not in uniform, but casual clothes. Winter coat and fur-trimmed boots - the picture of a student returning from the holidays.

“Who is it?” she asks, soft and urgent. “Who do they have?”

“Uraraka,” he says. “Ochako.”

Hagakure sucks in a sharp breath, but gives nothing else away.

Hitoshi feels her study his face, and on instinct, shutters his expression, making a blank canvas of himself, something to be projected onto. A beat passes, stretched thin, the heat of her body close enough to touch, and he feels, suddenly, as if they’re standing on the edge of some great precipice. His heart races, quickened by unfathomable instinct. Like he needs to move. Reach out and--what?

But he does nothing. Her stare cuts clean through him, and he can offer nothing back. They stand as if strangers, and he isn’t sure what she sees in his face, what he wants to *let* her see.

“I should go,” she says quickly. “My train... My train is supposed to get in tonight. Kurogiri was going to bring me to the station. Guess he’s... a little busy now.”

He swallows. Doesn’t ask what he desperately wants to. Instead, “Are you going to be okay? By yourself?”

“Always am,” she says. There’s a touch on his arm, brittle, there-and-gone. “Bye, Shinsou.”

He imagines reaching out, grasping her sleeve to follow it down to her hand; he imagines capturing the weight of it, the contours. He would hold her there, open his mouth to return the goodbye and ask her to stay instead, give voice to the words already aching on the tip of his tongue.

He imagines, but he does none of this. Just watches as she pulls away, and feels the current split wide, flooding the distance between them.

He's alone.

He stares after her, until his eyes ache with it.

He's alone.

The panic looms again - there, at the edge of his mind, seeping in like water through cracks in the hull of a ship. He's alone. *Again*.

His fists clench.

So fucking *what* if he's alone. He always was. Always. Even at UA - even the mission, *let the traitor see you alone*, the early morning and the long nights, the whispers and the clinging stares, all of it, he bore the burden. He bore it alone. And when he left it all behind, shrugged off their doubts and leapt, feet first, into darkness, he did that alone too. This whole time, playing his part, earning their trust, getting all the way here, now - he did it *alone*.

He wills back his breath, his control. The water's still rising, still threatening to drown, but he drags himself up, plants his feet against the current, and *thinks* .

He's surrounded by threats. Their guards are up, and his mask is slipping. After tonight, he knows he'll have lost trust - not just with Shigaraki, but Compress too. Hitoshi could read it from a mile away - the man didn't buy his excuse. If he plays it safe, if he does nothing, he might be able to salvage the relationship.

But if he does nothing, Uraraka dies.

Not an option.

Okay, next. Think.

He could fight, but he'd lose.

What else?

He could run, but how fast? Fast enough to find help before they notice he's gone? Before they kill her, or Kurogiri whisks her off to god knows where?

Okay. What else? Think. *Think.*

He could-- He could use his quirk. The realization jars him - a hero's great asset and somehow dead last on his list. Even as the idea begins to form, he can see the loose threads unravelling. He would have to get them all under his control, and subtly enough that none of the others noticed, or it would be easy work for one to jostle another out of it. There are at least eight of them in the base, notwithstanding any doubles Twice has spit up all over the place. Can he even hold that many?

He roves the room - finds exits marred by threats and watchful eyes. A cluster of Twice's doubles on the walkway, a fuming Spinner on the stairs. Toga catches his eye from across the room, and guilty instinct almost has him dodge the gaze.

He holds it instead, sees the question in her eyes. The challenge.

He knows these people.

Hitoshi propels himself forward before the plan's even half-formed, feels the tangled, fraying edges of it dragging at his feet as they come to rest in front of Toga.

He *knows* these people.

"Hey," he says, and coats his words not in power, not in venom and power and hidden webs, but simple, honest concern. "You okay?"

Toga scoffs. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Hitoshi lets his eyes flicker in the direction Shigaraki, then back to Toga. He searches her face. "You didn't wanna go?"

Her lips twist in a familiar pout. "I wasn't invited."

"And since when has that stopped you?"

"Not all of us have the power of favouritism on our side."

"It's not favoritism, it's common sense," he says, and lets a slow smile creep up his face. "Yeah, I could make her talk, if they'd let me. But *you* could make her *sing*."

He sees the second the arrow sinks its target. Toga's lips purse, then slowly stretch into a matching grin. "Oh, 'Toshi, you have such a way with words, you know that? You really know how to make a girl blush," she laughs, threads an arm in his like a fish sinks its mouth around the hook of a bait, and marches them both up the walkway.

Hitoshi lets her lead, body following on cue alone as his mind spins out with the possibilities.

Toga will lead them there. She can talk their way in, or at least try to. It won't look suspicious on *him* if she's the one making the pitch. A foot in the door, that's all he needs - an opportunity to see where they're keeping Uraraka. And once he's in the room with them, he can unravel his quirk, get them under his control.

The outline of a script begins to form. Maybe they'll get him to put Uraraka under first. Once they're confident that she's docile enough, they won't hurt her, maybe they won't even restrain her. Is she even *in* restraints? It won't matter, if he can get them all. He can make them release her, make them do *anything*.

Toga leads him to the second floor, down a narrow series of lifeless halls into a shuttered room that looks to once have been an office or boardroom of some kind. Broken chairs stand stacked in the corner, next to a long, dusty table, splintered down the center where it looks like someone was once thrown into it. There are two figures in the room - both Twice's doubles. One lounges with his hip against the corner of the table; the other leans against the wall, next to a heavy-set, deadbolted door--a bathroom, or adjoining office, maybe. A thin light creeps beneath the door, the flicker of movement and muffled voices from within.

A wave of nausea washes over him at the mere sight, mouth paper dry and suddenly lightheaded. He slips his arm from Toga's grasp, lingers a half pace behind, and tells himself it's strategy, not fear.

The doubles both straighten at Toga's brazen approach, the one closest to the door stepping hastily to block it. "What do you want?" he snaps.

"Come to join the fun?" coos the other.

"What are you, guard duty?" Toga glances between them. "A little extra, don'tcha think? They said they had a *student*, not Endeavor himself."

The double raises his hands in mock surrender. "Tell it to Shigaraki. He had me make, like, forty other guys."

"No, asshole, *I* made them," says the other.

Toga has about as much patience for their antics as Hitoshi. She brushes past them without another word. The double chuckles, but makes no move to stop her, even when she slams her knuckles into the wood.

The voices inside fall to a hush.

Hitoshi's face holds smooth while his heartbeat takes off - each beat like a bruise against his ribs. Movement. The *click* of a lock. Footsteps. The door creaks open.

He stares resolutely ahead as Compress steps through the doorway, sees without looking - a tiled floor, a windowless room, a rack of steel shelving. A figure on the floor - brown hair spilled out like a halo around her head. They've got her in cuffs - bulky, electric.

"What?" Compress snaps, and slams the door closed.

"Okay, first of all, if you're gonna torture her for fun, I'm *obviously* the best person for the job." Toga drawls. She produces a knife from thin air, twirls it effortlessly across her knuckles, as if to punctuate the point. "Second of all, if you're gonna torture her for *information*, then Hitoshi is. Duh."

Hitoshi swallows, drains his voice of all inflection, and offers, "I can make sure she isn't lying."

Compress doesn't so much as dignify this with a response. Instead, he fixes Toga with such a *look* that Hitoshi can do nothing but let whatever silent riddle he's unweaving work itself out.

Toga seems to sense the tension; some of the levity seeps away. "What? You know I'm right."

Compress continues to search her face, then at last seems to find whatever he's looking for. "Shigaraki will call on you. *If* he decides he needs you."

Toga sinks the knife into the wall an inch left of Compress' head. "Asshole. Let me talk to him."

Compress doesn't flinch. "Not now, Toga. Get back on the floor with the others. This won't take long, trust me." He turns away, gaze cutting through Hitoshi as if he were a ghost. "And Toga, watch yourself."

The words sink like a sliver of ice through Hitoshi's chest - razored edges slicing clean through the tangled wire of whatever desperate, half-cocked plan had been holding him together. Getting into the room, getting them to talk - all of it, in that instant, spills like blood into the drain. Compress won't answer him, won't even talk him. Like all those months ago in 1-A, using Spinner as a proxy, and now Toga.

Compress doesn't trust him.

No, worse. He *knows*.

"Ouch," one of the doubles says.

"Yeah, you just fuck off." Toga rolls her eyes. "Come on, Toshi."

He lets Toga drag him back, finds himself on the factory floor with no memory of having gotten there. He can't fight. He can't run. And now his quirk is *useless*, because Compress doesn't trust him, and Shigaraki never did, and who knows how many of the others still do? What about Dabi? Magne? His vision spins, and finds the shadows dripping, the jaws snapping shut, the dead ends closing in. What about Kurogiri?

He isn't sure how much time passes - between one blink and the next, it somehow feels like hours and mere minutes. Toga stays close, and Hitoshi struggles to reign control of his breath - shallow through clenched teeth, shoulders moving in tiny up-downs. Any moment now she's going to punch his arm and find it trembling, or tousle his hair and find it slick with sweat, and it'll all click into place. She'll turn to him with eyes wide in furious realization, then wrap her hands around his throat to smother whatever pathetic few breaths he's managed to swallow down.

But before the nightmare can come to life, there's a flurry of movement, and Toga's attention mercifully pulls away. She jolts to her feet at the sight of Shigaraki, emerging from the upper hall, cold-eyed and scowling. Compress and Kurogiri are quick on his heels, the three of them sailing over the walkway above Hitoshi's head and deeper into the base.

"Finally! Stay here, I'll talk to him," Toga huffs, and springs up the

stairs after them.

Hitoshi watches, stunned silent and limbs locked in place. He searches Kurogiri's gaze, tries to pry it open, to hold it for just a moment, and feels a slow, numb sickness creep through him when Kurogiri refuses to meet his eye.

Without thought, he jerks to his feet. To the top of the stairs. To follow.

The empty hall beckons.

Hitoshi freezes, fingers white around the railing. The walkway creaks, the echoes of retreating footsteps, backs turned away, *eyes* turned away.

The hallway. Is empty.

There's no subtlety, no stealth. He breaks into a dead sprint, hardly daring to hope, hardly daring to *think*. Momentum carries him twenty steps, then thirty, forty - muscle memory so keen it *hurts*, like the ache of a half-healed wound. He weaves through the twisting halls with a speed nearly foreign, skids into the office and halfway to the door before realization catches up. He stumbles. The *doubles*--

Are gone.

He stops, spins around.

No. There, behind the desk.

Two twin forms - more liquid than person, gray puss seeping like rot into the floorboards. His eyes skip across the scene like a stone over water, stuttering, then shoot wide in comprehension. They're--dead?

There's movement behind the door.

Hitoshi whirls around. The sound of metal rattling; a sharp, pained gasp; an election hum, crackling to a crescendo before it suddenly flatlines.

His hand is on the doorknob. It twists--already unlocked--and he wrenches it open.

A fist hurls into his face.

He staggers, skull screaming and vision molted black and red, and hits

the doorframe, knees sinking. Hands fist in his shirt and drag him back up before flinging him, weightlessly, into the air, where he sails over Uraraka's head and careens into the ceiling.

His senses follow at a delay - sight and sound chasing him as he spins, and spins. Loosened cuffs on the ground, splattered with blood; the deafening, unmistakable *clunk* of the deadbolt sliding into place as Uraraka slams the door behind her.

He pinwheels, nails scrabbling for purchase against the ceiling, the wall, *anything*. He kicks out uselessly, searching for ground, and hears the grunt of breath as his foot connects with something strange and yielding.

He steadies himself at last, limbs splayed across the wall like a spider. He stares into the empty room below. And stares.

He swipes a hand through the air. Finds nothing.

But.

"Hagakure?"

Silence. He licks his lips, tastes blood and fear.

"H-Hagak--"

An invisible hand snakes around his ankle and jerks him down, like a balloon tied to a string.

"You can't-- You can't tell anyone," Hagakure pleads. "Shinsou, please."

The hands climb as he lowers - from legs to waist to shoulders, where she grips him deperately, shaking him, like sifting sand, the dust slowly settling as his thoughts sink back into place behind his eyes.

"Shinsou, please don't. *Please.* "

"You came back," he says.

"She's my friend," she says. "I'm sorry, I couldn't-- I couldn't let them--"

His hands fly to her arms, the shape of them sturdy and anchoring. He pries her fingers from his shoulders, holds them instead in his own, laying lines of heat as he threads them together. "You came *back*."

It swells through him, pure and utter *relief*, and for a moment, he can do nothing but live on that rising tide, let it carry him over the shock and pain and fear, still brewing beneath and screaming of danger to come - but for just a moment, it doesn't matter. For just one moment more, it won't matter. Because she came back. She's here.

Oh shit. Oh fuck. She's *here*.

"Did anyone see you?"

"No," she says. "Not even Uraraka. I made it look like a tech malfunction, with the shock cuffs. I had just loosened them when she woke up."

Hitoshi nods, and releases to face the door. Still afloat, he can't get much torque, but he tries the door handle anyway, just to confirm his suspicion. Locked.

Just then, the spell breaks - Hitoshi bends his knees to cushion the fall. His injured leg buckles, but Hagakure steadies him, and he lets himself lean against her for a moment. How many seconds was he floating? Forty? Fifty? Long enough for Uraraka to escape?

She'll have looked for a window, surely, with her quirk. Were there windows in the office? He doesn't think so. But it wouldn't have taken long to find one in the halls beyond. If she's lost concentration on him, then she must be using it on something else. With any luck, she's a mile into the sky by this point.

So then he did it. *They* did it. Uraraka got out.

They aren't going to.

He sets his shoulders, and backs up a step, still facing the door.

"Shinsou?"

"Twice can feel when his doubles die," he says, and bends his knees. "They're going to come looking, any second now. They're going to find me."

She tenses, and slowly sinks into a matching stance.

"They're going to open this door, and see that Uraraka is gone, and they're going to know exactly why I'm here." He breathes, slow and even, and keeps his voice low, matter-of-fact, even as his throat begins

to close, even as the tears begin to swell. “And I’m going to fight. And I’m going to lose.”

He swipes his eyes hastily, keeps speaking before she can stop him. “But they’re not going to see you. They’re not going to know that you were ever here. Because the second the door opens, I’m going to throw myself at whoever’s standing in front of it. And you’re going to run.”

He sets his feet, feels her step to match it again. Without a word, her hand comes to land on his left shoulder - favouring the side she’s going to make for the door.

Her breath is hot against the back of his neck, soft and panic-fast. She doesn’t protest, doesn’t so much as say a word. Hitoshi has no idea what she’s thinking - if she’s scrambling for another solution, or already accepted that he’s right. But he *is* right. He knows he is. The only way she gets out of this is with him as the sacrifice.

It’s okay, he wants to tell her. I won’t let them hurt you.

The lock latches. The door swings open.

His mind registers: Compress, closest; Spinner, behind him, sword leveled.

He screams. “Help!”

Spinner scoffs. “Do you seriously think we’re gonna--”

“Drop the sword and attack Compress!”

Spinner’s jaw goes slack as the sword clatters to the ground. He lurches mindlessly towards Compress, who ducks the swipe, and is instead caught by Hitoshi in a full-body tackle.

They stumble, limbs locked, and Hitoshi flings himself into Compress’ arms, wraps his legs around his knees and pulls him bodily to the ground. They go down in a tangle of limbs, and Hitoshi scrambles to stay on top.

Compress recovers quickly, and buries a fist between his shoulderblades, but Hitoshi holds true, pinning him in place as another hit rains down, and another after that. His mind is full of nothing but singular, ferocious purpose. He needs to clear the door. He needs to fight.

Spinner stumbles over and delivers a kick to Compress' head, whose jaw snaps shut around a cry of pain. He rears back for another kick and Compress releases Hitoshi at last to focus on his second attacker. Hitoshi rolls away as Compress jabs a hand into the meat of Spinner's thigh, right into his still-fresh bullet wound.

"Ghagh, what the *fuck*," Spinner howls, and staggers back, snapping free of Hitoshi's control.

He has no idea where Hagakure is - if she's still in the room or long gone. But he's not done. Pure, animal instinct cuts through him like a riptide, stealing the pain. He keeps fighting.

He charges Compress again, gets him in a messy headlock and rams an elbow into the back of his neck. He dodges an attempted headbutt then returns it with one of his own, feels the vaudeville mask crack and wastes no time digging his fingers under it, nails scratching at the delicate skin beneath.

Compress plants his hands on Hitoshi's chest and shoves, sends him sprawling backwards. The move at last breaks them apart - Compress falling to his knees and Hitoshi rising to his, then back to his feet. He needs to keep fighting. He *needs* to keep fighting.

He looks up.

The room is void of light - its furniture and inhabitants consumed, the walls and ceiling crawling with ropes of thick, glacial fog. From the darkness, a single figure takes form - eyes of yellow utterly instructable.

Hitoshi pants, open-mouthed, aching. His fists unfurl, arms slowly falling to his sides. The electric current of his pulse settles, bit by brittle bit, and the veneer of bravery with it. He begins to shake.

The door behind him hangs open, and he knows without looking the room is empty. Hagakure is gone.

Compress stands, parting the fog. His mask is cracked, the teeth beneath stained with blood, the eyes narrowed into hateful slits. "Kuro," is all he says.

"I know," Kurogiri says, without inflection.

Hitoshi straightens as Compress approaches. He raises a hand and Compress hesitates. But Hitoshi only extends his palm, still trembling,

but resolute - as if to invite the inevitable. He did it. He fought - as hard as he could, for as long as he could.

He stares over Compress' shoulder, feels the touch as releases his quirk. The world bends, turns glassy and gray, and Hitoshi holds Kurogiri's gaze until his vision falls dark.

The Hostage

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shouta jerks awake, lathered in the sweat and the bitter aftertaste of some bleary, half-forgotten dream. The moon cuts a silver crescent in the sky beyond the window, pale shadows made harsh and blue where his phone screen is lit like a beacon and furiously vibrating its way toward the edge of the nightstand.

“Ugh,” he says, immediately awake and miserable for it.

He flickers on the light, pushes damp hair from his eyes and grabs the phone just as the vibrations cut off.

Missed call from Origin Hero Agency.

He checks the time - 12:06AM. The lock screen - no emergency alerts. The window - no blazing hellfire.

“Ugh,” he says again, and calls back.

The dispatcher picks up on the first ring, says, “Please hold,” and transfers the line.

“The fuck?” Shouta says into the silence, one pant leg on and weapon already spooled in hand.

The line clicks. “Eraserhead?” says a terse, female voice.

“That’s me,” he says stupidly, and finds the second pant leg just in time to prevent his face from meeting the floor.

“This is Dragon Hero Ryuku. How quickly can you get to Saitama?”

The ambulance’s backdoor hangs partially open, and the harsh winter draft creeps in like an unwanted guest from the night beyond. Ochako sits her with legs dangled over the edge of the stretcher, toes curled against the chill, and wonders if it’s the cold or the cocktail of drugs

sluggishly making its way down the IV that have forestalled the pain.

Her reflection stares back at her in the tinted windows of the cabin - pale and wide-eyed, washed in the flickering shades of the emergency lights beyond. There's a collection of cop cars gathered not twenty feet from the ambulance, and if she were smart, she'd be out there right now, offering assistance, like a good hero-in-training should.

Shame burns a hole in the pit of her chest, and she stays right where she is.

Her thumb is broken from slipping the cuffs - a trick she remembers reading in her Hero Course textbook. There was even a question about it on the midterm. She glances down at it with pure academic detachment - the joint of her thumb purple with swelling, stark against the white gauze of the splint - and can almost imagine it's the glossy, hyper-realistic diagram in the textbook.

There's movement through the window - blurred figures lit from behind in reds and blues, and she starts up with a stab of fear.

God, she hopes it's not mom. She's trying *really* hard to keep it together, and doesn't know if she'd be able to handle seeing her parents right now.

She swallows past the fear and runs through her story again. The alley, Shinsou, Kurogiri. She needs to remember as much as possible when the Pros question her. The portal, the warehouse, the sudden darkness. She needs to be helpful, be professional, be heroic. Electric cuffs, Shigaraki Tomura. And the masked man from the training camp. What did they call him again? Condense? Compress?

There are arms around her, and Ochako jerks from the memory with a stifled gasp. Long hair tickles her nose, the scratch of stubble against her cheek. Not mom, then.

"Sensei?" she croaks.

Aizawa pulls back a fraction, keeps one arm around her shoulders like an anchor. The ambulance doors hang open behind him, the paramedics hovering. He pays them no mind. His eyes are hard in his face, lips thin and pale. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," she manages, and feels her throat close up around sudden, inexplicable tears. Aizawa doesn't react except to press his thumb in small circles, comforting. Ochako swipes at her eyes, face burning. "I

am, I'm okay."

She's not even that *hurt*, really. Just her thumb, swollen in its splint. Just the skin of her wrists, scraped from the cuffs. Just her knuckles, split from where she'd dashed them against Shinsou's teeth, and chest, and face. *God*. He hadn't even fought back.

"Sensei," she says. "I saw him. Shinsou."

Aizawa stills. His thumb digs into the meat of her shoulder, just enough to hurt, then quickly retracts. "Tell me what happened."

Ochako nods. Helpful, professional. *Heroic*.

She tells him everything.

Shouta doesn't panic.

The threat is there, like an itch, tightening his skin against the thrum of his pulse, the static charge building in his veins. But he doesn't panic.

He puts out the call, pockets his phone and waits for backup, and doesn't panic. He fits his earpiece, steadies his breath and loosens the tension in his muscles, and doesn't panic. He doesn't. He simply can't afford to.

Uraraka's account of events was somewhat muddled, and clearly missing key details in the form of a specific Hitoshi-based context. But what he knows is this:

Until tonight, the League of Villains had resided, undetected, in an abandoned industrial yard not forty-five minutes from the heart of Musutafu. And Hitoshi was with them.

Uraraka was captured by them on a routine patrol of the area. A death sentence for anyone, let alone a lone UA student. But they didn't kill her. They didn't hurt her. Rather, they left her, unguarded, in an unlocked room with faulty cuffs.

It's a miracle. More importantly, it doesn't make a single goddamn ounce of sense. The League is reckless, but they're not half that

stupid.

Not a miracle, then. A test.

One which he can only assume Hitoshi failed.

“This is a rescue mission, not a takedown,” he tells Ryuku. “You make sure your team knows that.”

“Understood,” she says. “How many are we looking for?”

He grimaces. “Just one. Male, sixteen years old.”

She gives him a startled look, eyes searching, but to her credit, doesn’t question it.

Headlights cut across the street as a brigade of police vans approach, their doors sliding open to unload a squadron of armoured officers. They move into formation, joining Ryuku’s team and the eclectic collection of small-time Pros already drawn by the midnight call. She glances over them, then back to Shouta, who snaps to attention. The electricity in his veins crackles, singing for a fight.

Ryuku signals. “Let’s move.”

The radio on Tsukauchi’s desk crackles to life, static jolting him from his stupor. He jerks up from his mound of paperwork and glances across the precinct, watches the other four or five unlucky souls on the midnight oil snap into similar focus.

“I need field units at 3349 Industrial Avenue, Saitama Prefecture.”

Tsukauchi trades a look with the nearest officer, and sees the same question in his eyes. He grabs the receiver. “Dispatcher, this is Detective Tsukauchi. We’re, uh. We’re all the way in Musutafu. Can you get a patrol division?”

There’s a beat of static, then, “Negative. All units engaged. Code 604. We’re imposing a full perimeter lockdown.”

604. Tsukauchi’s stomach drops.

That means villains. That means the League.

He clicks the receiver. “We’re on our way.”

Haru’s twelve hours into her double shift when she notices the security guard beside the elevator. She’s pretty sure he wasn’t there a minute ago.

It’s not unusual to have extra hands on the pediatric ward - but it *is* unusual for them to be so heavily armed. She shoots a look to the receptionist, who only shrugs.

She puts her head down and finishes her rounds. Most of her inpatients are fast asleep - no code blues, no one in critical care. Even the waiting room is suspiciously empty, wall-mounted TVs running muted 6 o’clock re-runs. Blasphemous as it is, she’s almost tempted to think it might be a quiet night.

Except there’s a security guard by the stairwell now too. And she *knows* he wasn’t there a minute ago.

Behind the glass wall of the waiting room, the TVs flicker, in synch, to a stern-faced broadcaster. *Breaking News*, reads the tagline. *Emergency curfew imposed in Saitama Prefecture*.

The cold drip of anxiety settles like ice in her stomach, the chill radiating outward until her whole body tingles with it. Not so quiet, then.

She sets her jaw, and gets back to work.

Toshinori stands at the window of his fourth-story apartment as if at attention, eyes hard and tired in the harsh glow of his phone. Notification alerts flash across the screen - some civilian, others specialized, the dregs of intel from various old Pro channels. He skims the subject lines and his fist tightens around the hard plastic of his phone as sheer *uselessness* grips at his throat.

Outside, a gentle snowfall has started up. It drifts past the window, betraying nothing of the stifling warmth within.

Several streets over, the wail of sirens grow distant, emergency lights shrinking into darkness.

And finally, all the way across the city, as midnight crawls into early morning, the entirety of UA campus goes into a quiet, controlled lockdown.

Nedzu rouses himself with another cup of coffee and closes the door of his office. He checks the security feed for the third time, dispatches another set of night guards to the 1-A dorms, and settles in for a long night of watching the shadows retreat across the grounds.

His laptop blinks with incoming notifications. Automatic status updates from Origin Hero Agency and Musutafu PD and Saitama General. On the corner of his desk, his phone lights up. Another call from All Might, he's sure, which he's more than happy to let go unanswered. He spares it a glance, and pauses at a different but no less expected name - Eraserhead.

His paw hovers over the screen, then freezes.

The door is open.

It takes a moment for his eyes to adjust to the sight that greets him. The hallway beyond is dark, motion-sensor lights untriggered. Only the slight melt of snow gives away his intruder's approach, come to rest in the doorway in the form of small, child-like footprints.

His gaze travels up the length of his invisible guest, and settle where he can only suspect the face might be. He lets Aizawa's call go to voicemail.

They sweep through the lot in organized sets, tightening the perimeter as they go. Ryuku directs her team with swift precision around every

corner and hidden bend, Shouta uncharacteristically at the helm, breath frozen in anticipation.

The fight he's praying for doesn't come.

Instead, the pressure builds as he sweeps methodically from room to empty room - a blinding white noise between his ears, not unlike the prattle of a rainstorm against a window. Every so often a roll of thunder announces itself, or a sudden gust of wind slams a fist against the glass and sends it rattling in its frame. Like the old, washed out bloodstains that rust the concrete, or the second-story room that overlooks the main floor, itself littered with stains of dubious origin. A smouldering cigarette clings to life where it's been abandoned to burn a small hole in the tabletop. Beside it sits a half-finished glass of ale, condensation still clinging to the rim.

They were here. Maybe only hours before.

"Ground floor all clear," comes a voice in his earpiece.

"Second floor all clear," comes another. "But it looks like they left in a hurry."

Hours. Maybe minutes. Hitoshi was here.

He longs to wrap his fingers around that glass, to fling it across the room as watch the shards explode like the window threatens to.

He stills his hand, and the window holds strong - the torrential downpour stayed another minute more.

He doesn't panic.

There are signs of a fight on the second floor. A dusty old boardroom with a closet turned makeshift cell, where they must have kept Uraraka. There's a kitchen. A bar. Bedrooms - sheets crumpled, clothes strewn across the floor.

A cold, vicious pragmatism slides like a knife beneath the windowsill, chipping at the seal bit by brittle bit. This was their base. This was their *home*. They wouldn't have left unless they had to, he thinks, and clenches his teeth against the storm. They wouldn't have left unless they *knew*.

Ryuku rounds them up before long, orders everyone back outside while they get a forensics team into the building. She tries to catch

Shouta's eye, but he ducks the gaze. His breath comes out hard, trembling, a cloud that scatters in the cold. His whole body *aches*, bottled adrenaline beating against his ribs.

The whole area is swarming with law enforcement now, police tape fluttering in the wind, evidence markers dotting the cracked ground and flashlights sweeping between them like flares. It's good. It's necessary. The League left in such a hurry, they're sure to have left something of value behind. Something to point them to Hitoshi. Anything.

Everywhere he turns, there's the flash of a camera, or an officer taking a sample swab. It's good. It's *good*. Everyone's looking.

No one knows what they're looking *for*.

"Eraser!" a familiar voice pierces the thunder. Shouta glances up and spots Tsukauchi ducking a cordon. The man jog towards him and skids to a breathless stop. He gives him a single searching look, then lets out a stream of curses. "The kid?"

Shouta swallows. Ducks his head in a nod. "They're gone. He's gone."

"Shit fucking shit," Tsukauchi says again. "They know?"

"They know."

Tsukauchi glances around, pitches his voice low. "Who else?"

"Ryuku. Her team. I don't know," he snaps. "Does it matter? He's *gone*."

He gives him a pitying look. "Is there anything I can do?"

Shouta breathes raggedly, as if to expel the fear that sits bitter at the back of his throat. Tsukauchi waits, patient while he reigns himself in. "I need an APB out on Shinsou," he forces out. "I need people looking for him."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Shouta shoots him an incredulous look, bites out, "The League already knows."

Tsukauchi raises his hands, placating. "But they might not know everything. They might think he acted alone. If we put out a notice that he's been with us the *whole* time..." His mouth twists in a

grimace. "It might stoke the flames."

It might make them angry. It might make them hurt him. More than they probably already have. Shouta digs his knuckles into his eyes like he's trying to stab the thought back into his brain. He doesn't panic. He *doesn't*.

"It's your call," Tsukauchi says. "We can put out a notice, make it top clearance. Pros and high level law enforcement only. No media."

As if it'll matter. As if it'll make *any* difference. Shouta shakes his head. They can't just be shooting in the dark. There's too much at risk. "I don't know," he admits. He needs a plan. He needs *Nedzu*. "I need to make a call."

He tears himself out of his spiral, forces his legs to move until he's cleared the perimeter. There's a quiet alley a block away, basked in shadow and carefully hidden from the chaos of the warehouse lot. He breathes in the scent of mold and piss, kicks at a bit of loose piping in anger and watches it clatter off the alley walls.

He calls Nedzu.

The bastard lets it go to voicemail.

He calls again.

Voicemail. "Pick up," he says into the silence, and redials.

This time, the line connects on the first ring, and something of the bottled panic cracks open inside his chest.

"They have Hitoshi, and they know," he says in one breath. "They *know*, and they-- They took him. I don't know where. We don't-- They had a base, right here in Saitama, right under our fucking noses. But he's gone. He could be anywhere. He could be *dead*."

"Aizawa," Nedzu says, and there is a thin, rigid line in his voice that cuts like a knife through the roar of Shouta's pulse. "I'm sorry to disrupt your investigation, but I'm going to have to ask you to come to my office."

Nedzu disconnects the call and calmly lowers the phone, fixing his guest with his best approximation of bemused chagrin. "I apologize for the interruption."

A shift in the fabric of the seat. Nedzu imagines she must be waving an arm in what he can only assume is an allowance, perched where she is, quite comfortably, on the padded chair across from his desk. The door is closed once again, and they are alone.

The security cameras would, at least, attest to the fact that *someone* was in his office, and Nedzu suspects it would not take his staff too long to deduce who. All the same, he wonders if she could kill him, if she wanted.

Probably, he suspects. Maybe. It's difficult to say. He knows next to nothing about her - an oversight for which he is quite angry with himself.

But no time for that now.

She does not seem to wish him harm, for the moment. She does not seem to wish, or display, or *be* much of anything, in fact. Her body language, as far as he can read it, is fluid and relaxed. Her voice betrays only infinite patience. Her face, if he could see it, he's certain would be utterly impassive. She is impossibly good at being nothing at all.

And so he is angry with himself. But mostly, he is deeply, viciously curious.

"Why?" he asks.

There is no answer forthcoming, but then, he did aim a little high, with that one. Contrary to popular belief, he *can* admit when he has been outplayed, and so he sets his sights lower. "Why are you here, Hagakure?"

Her invisible smile drips with venom. "Because I'm the only one that can save him."

For all that it is one, it feels nothing like any interrogation Shouta's

ever been a part of.

For one, he can hardly bring himself to speak, let alone question her. He can do nothing but stand there. His feet may as well be melded in place, his chest constricted in iron. Every sinew in his body feels pulled taut, like a whip, set to rain down in arcs of fury across Nedzu's pretentious, pristine office.

And all the while she sits placidly, unbound, in her chair. His eyes swim and dance across it, struggling to find focus.

He stands behind her, back to the door, staring, staring, seeing *nothing*. His quirk fires and misfires, aching for something to sink its claws into. His eyes burn.

He feels distinctly off-kilter - certain at any moment she'll spring up and attack, or bolt for the door. It's shock, he knows - the senseless undertow of adrenaline washing through him. Anger struggles for footing against it, but flounders at his lack of target. He can't even bring himself to aim it her way, too stunned by her involvement to even begin to wrestle with its implications.

It's as if she's a non-entity in his head. Any other time he might feel bad for thinking it, but right now he can only scramble under the fact that as he casts his mind over their previous interactions during the last year, he finds them coloured with *nothingness*. No emotion, no suspicion, nothing. Not even the usual, long-suffering fondness he normally harbours for his students. He doesn't feel like he thinks he ought to. He doesn't feel like he was betrayed by a close friend, or an ally, or a student, because as he looks at the empty space of the girl before him, he can only think, *I have no idea who this is*.

"Do you know where they've taken him?" Nedzu asks.

"No," Hagakure says. "I have contact locations, but I don't spend time at the main bases. I didn't. Not until the warehouse. Which is obviously no longer in service."

Shouta's got no clue why she's being so forthright. No clue why she's here at all. He's tempted to spit, "*Liar*," only, he's not sure that she is.

"I know they're going to torture him," she says flatly. "And they're going to make him tell them everything."

"His quirk will make that very difficult," Nedzu says, equally flat.

"They'll find a way," she says. "And when they do, they'll know what he told you. And what he didn't tell you."

Nedzu's eyes narrow. He stares ahead like he can almost see her, steady and calculating. "You want them to think he sold you out."

Shouta chances him a glance before he tears his gaze back to Hagakure. Is that what she wants? An escape? A safety net? An excuse to be brought in, so the League can think she was sold out instead of having betrayed them?

"I want them to think that you have a hostage too," she bites each word. "Otherwise, they have no reason to keep theirs alive."

Shouta's thoughts grind to a halt, mouth dropping open to form the words, "To exchange?"

"To exchange," she says.

Any second now the sensible, ethical, *heroic* side of his heart will shudder to life, lurch its way up his throat and crawl into his mouth to form the protests he *knows* he should give. It will taste like a lie and it will feel like an injustice, and it will hurt—*god*, will it hurt—but it will be right and fair and *good*. And it's going to happen. Any second now.

"What about your parents?" Nedzu asks. "How are they implicated in this?"

"They aren't," Hagakure says. "My birth parents have no legal say in my actions, and they know nothing of my involvement with the League."

Shouta feels Nedzu's gaze in the corner of his vision, questioning. He throws his mind back over his class roster records. He visited with all of 1-A's parents and guardians back when they first proposed moving the students into the dorms. Hagakure had an uncle, is all he remembers. Older guy, quirkless, grey hair and glasses. He gives a small shake of his head.

Nedzu hums, unsatisfied, and turns his focus back to Hagakure. "How did the League recruit you?"

"That's not important."

"I suspect it very much is," Nedzu says, and Shouta twitches. His voice has taken that peculiar inflection that it so rarely does - words

rounded and soft, a veneer of empathy like cheap plastic coating. It's a tone better set for charity events and wide-eyed first years, for convincing panels of legal experts that he's just like them, fragile and frightened and human. "Hagakure, if there's someone you need protection from--"

"I don't." She cuts through the sheen like a nail, driven into the rotten foundation beneath. "And when I did, there were no heroes offering it."

Nedzu blinks. His chin dips in a slow nod, as if confirming with himself. He doesn't look at Shouta - he doesn't have to. A silent understanding lays itself quietly between them, dark and ugly.

"All the same," Nedzu says. "You must have a legal guardian of some sort. Surely they will object."

Hagakure says nothing.

"In custody of the state, then?" Nedzu presses.

"If you'd been this worried about the legality of your actions since day one, we wouldn't be having this conversation, would we?" she snaps, and for a brief second, the cool, practiced guise peels back, revealing the burning hot coals beneath. Shouta adjusts his stance, weapon spooling in hand without conscious thought.

"Legality is one thing, ethics are another," Nedzu says. "You are proposing that I sign off on trading the lives of children."

"You're not trading lives," she bites. "*His* is the only life at risk. I will be *fine*, because I'm one of them."

Quietly, Nedzu says, "If that were true, you wouldn't be here now."

The guise snaps back. The coals flare hot.

"*Fuck* you," she snarls. "Don't act like you're morally superior for arguing to keep me here. You're a pathetic hero. You'd rather do nothing and let that indecision kill him, than make a decision that involves getting *your* hands dirty, that makes *you* feel guilty." She leans forward, heels pressing into the carpet, ragged breaths fluttering the loose paper on Nedzu's desk. The arms of her chair all but splinter in the vice of her grip.

"You don't have to feel guilty about sending me back. It's exactly what

I want. It's exactly what I deserve. I know what I'm doing. I know what I am, and what I've done." Her words come out in gasps, each punched from her chest, hard and fast and wracked with pain. "I've betrayed you, again and again and again. I've sold valuable information about your weakness to those people. I've put your life and the life of every single student at this fucking clown-show of a school at risk. And now, I am trying to save *one* of them." Her voice catches, choked with a nameless emotion, before she wrestles it back. "That doesn't make up for anything. That doesn't make me a good person. But it makes you an idiot if you won't listen to me."

The silence rings, hollow and cold in her wake. Shouta doesn't even have to look at Nedzu to feel the flicker of his smile, dark. Almost proud.

Hagakure is right. The promised protests do not rise to his lips, and the taste of his guilt is easy to swallow. The girl before him is a stranger and a villain, and he can muster no affection for her.

The shame is an ugly thing, twisted within him, but this too he can push aside. It's not a question of whether he should, but a simple understanding of the fact that he already has.

"Very well," Nedzu says. "What do you propose?"

Hitoshi wakes to the sensation of falling.

His shoulders scream in their sockets as the tension in his arms releases. Like rocks pulled loose from the base of a mountain, the landslide roars down after them, a cascade of pain-relief-*pain* that floods down his body like the blood from his fingertips, drowning out all sense.

And then his weight hits his feet, and he screams.

Or, tries to.

Black fog smothers him, lifts him, and someone slings his arm across broad shoulders. He goes weightless, mind dull, teetering back on the edge of unconsciousness, before the fog explodes into screaming, violent light.

His stomach heaves and his eyes sting. A pale blue sky. A sea of white. The wind howls, impossibly loud, air sharp and dry and searing his lungs from the inside out. He's dying, he's delirious, he's *outside*.

Kurogiri adjusts his grip on Hitoshi's arm. Fingers around his wrist, grasping. Grounding. Real. This is real.

There's another sound, through the wind. Approaching. The crunch of snow beneath tires. A car parks, maybe a hundred yards away. The distance bends and stretches between them. The door opens, and—

His throat stutters, vision tunneling. Fear lances through him, a cold spike of horror.

Aizawa.

No, no, *no* - please, he needs to run, he needs to go, they're going to kill him. But he's not moving.

"Let him go," Aizawa calls over the wind.

His heart lurches. A wet breath trembles his chest. The wind sings its note.

The fingers around his wrist tighten. "He can't walk."

Hitoshi wrenches against his hold. He kicks out, staggers, possessed with sudden, frenzied clarity. His lips form soundless, desperate words, then cries, when his feet meet the ground. The snow does nothing against the burning pain, but he forces his legs steady, and miraculously, Kurogiri retracts his hold.

This can't be real. He must be dead.

He needs to *move*.

He takes a step. His body screams. He takes another, feels Kurogiri's touch slide away, inch by inch. His vision dips, spotting gray and red. He keeps his eyes locked on the hazy landmark of Aizawa, forces himself another step, then another, moving through the pain and then beyond.

Next to Aizawa, something begins to move too.

Not something. Someone.

His knees hit the ground. Aizawa starts a half-step, then freezes, eyes

flickering from Hitoshi to Kurogiri and back.

But she keeps walking.

The collar of her coat is ramrod straight, her strides long and sure-footed. If she hesitates, if she so much as glances his way, he can't tell.

Hitoshi lifts his head, opens his mouth to call out, voiceless. The sun slants straight through her, like she isn't there at all, cuts into his eyes and blinds him. He pulls back with a wince, and cannot see, but *feels* the moment she moves beyond his reach.

There's a shift in the air - the cold billow of a black fog at his back.

Aizawa stares ahead, and gives the slightest dip of a nod.

The fog retracts. The wind howls. Aizawa begins to sprint towards him.

Hitoshi's unconscious before Aizawa makes it to his side.

Part 2

End

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone!

If you've made it this far, wow, congrats! Thank you so much for sticking it out. I'm very happy to have gotten the chance to share this story so far with you all.

This was and will be the biggest leg of the fic, and contains what is probably the most complicated plot I've ever taken a stab at. Was it the cleanest execution? Perhaps not. But I write for joy of writing, not to win any literary awards, so. Ya get what ya get.

Part 3 will take us into back to some familiar territory and, hopefully, a few more fun twists. You guys can look forward to some sweet sweet angst, PR fallout, consequences of our actions.com, and more of that dearly missed Dadzawa bonding.

Drop a comment if you can, and I'll see you all soon!

Safe

Chapter Notes

Hey you!

Thanks for sticking around / jumping back in. Welcome to Part 3.

Quick housekeeping:

1) I updated the tags and bumped up the rating. This was done in anticipation of:

General content warnings for upcoming chapters: discussion of substance abuse, addiction, and withdrawal; heavy reference to PTSD as a result of physical violence; and medical trauma. (It's not all sad, I promise.)

Specific trigger warning for this chapter: see endnotes.

2) I am going to do my absolute best to stick to a more consistent updating schedule moving forward. I want you all to rest assured that this story will be finished, and we're going out strong at around 180k words.

That's it! I've been working on this fic for almost 5 years. Man, that's crazy to think about. Thank you for being a part of it.

On with the show!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Part 3

Hero

League of Villains hideout discovered?

Posted on www.QuirkBlog.jp at 9:06AM on January 6

The criminal underworld was rocked last Sunday when Pro Heroes of all kinds gathered in Saitama Prefecture for a midnight raid of what many now suspect to be the former hideout of--you guessed it--the League of Villains!

Reports showed an unprecedented spike in police and Pro activity in southern Saitama and near Shihori Park between midnight and 6AM early Monday morning.

QuirkBlog reporters caught up with some of the Heroes rumoured to have been involved in the action, who remained uncharacteristically tight-lipped despite our expert interrogations. No arrests have been announced at this time, but an inside source from Musutafu PD hinted that the incident may have been triggered by someone associated with the city's premier Hero Academy, UA High. Could the person in question be none other than former UA student-turned-villain, Shinsou Hitoshi?

The young criminal made headlines last year in his highly publicised turn to villainy, joining forces with the League in what many have cited as one of the biggest PR scandals in UA's spotty history.

Recent studies on digital counterterrorism have demonstrated a direct link between the League's release of their call to arms video this past October, and an influx in low-level villainous crime in the Musutafu, Tokyo, and Kyoto regions. But the League itself, it seems, has moved on to bigger and more terrifying enterprises, including the theft of some 3.2 billion yen from Musutafu's Golden Heights National Bank in December.

Now, with Pro Heroes closing in, it's unclear whether the loss of their

*Saitama homestead has weakened the League, or only stoked their flame!
Who knows what they have planned next?*

*This story is being updated daily. Hit the subscribe button to be notified
when more intell drops!*

Awareness comes violent and cold.

Compress' quirk releases and Hitoshi's limbs unfurl, joints slotting into sockets while bones snap into place. The force punches the breath from his chest. He hits the ground with a strangled cry, registers darkness, pain, the feeling of cool tile against his cheek, before unseen hands wrench him to his feet.

He lashes out blindly, and earns a slap across the face for his effort. Someone forces his arms above his head.

"Wait," he tries. "Please."

Cuffs latch, pinning his arms in place. His assailant moves away, and whatever he's cuffed to begins to rise, gears groaning in the walls, dragging him to the balls of his feet. He's left not quite dangling, heels lifted with toes grazing the ground.

The figure returns, crystalizing as his vision adjusts to the dark. His eyes flit around the shape, to the faint sliver of light behind them. A door? He looks up. The cuffs are silver and stark in the darkness, chained to some kind of conveyor belt overhead.

A hand cracks across his ear. "Look at me." Shigarki's voice.

"Please," he begs.

Another slap. He stumbles, feet scrabbling for purchase, arms straining against the weight. He coughs. Tastes blood and salt.

A fist in his hair. A gag in his mouth. Cloth, duct tape. Wrapped tight, once, twice, a screaming pressure around the base of his skull. His mind swoops with panic, the weightless plunge of a rollercoaster over the edge of the earth. He wheezes a pathetic breath through the snot and tears just to remind himself he can.

Lights flare overhead, and he flinches, earns another strike. Shigaraki leans close, his breath hot against Hitoshi's face.

They stand like that for a long moment, Hitoshi's eyes skittering around his face, afraid to look away lest it earn him another slap. He focuses on the stubble of his chin. Spit starts to gather behind the gag, and his throat works to swallow, breath laboured. His arms ache, blood draining from his fingertips to leave them numb.

Shigaraki raises a hand, smiles at his flinch.

"Good." He lowers it, slowly, to Hitoshi's throat. Presses the tip of his finger into his pulse, then twists it deeper, *deeper*, until he can feel the curve of Shigaraki's nail against the underside of his tongue. "Not going to try that again, are we?"

He shakes his head mutely.

"Good," Shigaraki says again. "Now let's talk."

Awareness comes like a tide.

The experience is not entirely unpleasant. Hitoshi lies beneath the soothing waters, gentle waves lapping at the shores of his mind, pouring sensation into his limbs to leave them tingling and half-numb.

His eyelids flutter, hazy behind the veil of whatever drugs must surely be coursing through him. Thoughts form and begin to fade before he's finished thinking them. Hitoshi doesn't chase them.

He does nothing for a long time but listen to the beep of a heart monitor and let the soft overhead lights blur. He supposes he is in a hospital, and therefore injured, but can't quite tell if he should consider this fact important, too mesmerised by the sensation of floating, the rising tide of warmth. He wonders if this is real, then wonders what cocktail of meds cooked up *that* particular thought.

He curls his fingers experimentally, and frowns when he cannot feel the tug of the IV needle. He flexes his toes beneath the blanket, and all the drugs in the world couldn't mute the ache of the scabs on the soles of his feet.

A memory stabs up behind his eyes, but the wave carries him over it. Soft lights, heart monitor, the drip of the IV he can't feel. There's a window next to his bed, a gentle snowfall beyond. Distant emotions swim like sharks behind his ribs.

He roves the room, unsure what he's expecting to find. He rolls his gaze up to some sort of switchboard above his head--sees buttons and monitors of pulsing light--and winces from the strain. There's a throb somewhere behind his skull - a bone deep ache. The pain comes with another memory, and he flinches at the ghost of a hand rising to strike him.

Soft lights, monitor, IV. Hospital. He's in the hospital. *Surely* this is important.

The tide recedes, and the wave drags him helplessly back out to sea. He doesn't remember closing his eyes, but blinks them open some time later at the sound of a closing door. The light outside the window has changed - the shadows strange and inverted. There's someone in the room - medical mask, pale green scrubs. They fiddle with something on the switchboard, then pause when they sense him watching.

"Good morning, Shinsou."

Morning, then. That might also be important, but again, the thought evades him before he can pin it down. He frowns.

"I'm happy to see you're awake," the person who must be a nurse says, and presses a series of buttons above his head. "I'm going to call the doctor in, and then we'll let your mom know, okay?"

Mom. This, at last, earns the first stab of clarity, and the drug-addled fugue drains away so fast it leaves him cold. His heart flops like a beached fish in his chest.

He opens his mouth, and feels his throat work against something solid and stiff.

"Oh, please don't try to speak yet." The nurse hands him something from the bedside table. A small, flimsy whiteboard and a dry erase marker. "Just use these for now."

He stares.

His hand rises to his neck like a puppet on a string, and finds something incomprehensible. Gauze, tape, a hard plastic tube.

Memories jolt behind his eyes, a reel of terror and pain. Darkness, shouts, a hand around his throat. An agony so blinding it lit him aflame from the inside out. Soft lights, heart monitor, the quickening drum of its beat. Mom.

Mom.

He has no memory of the next few moments - only that there are suddenly several more people in the room. One of them has an arm around him, pressing him back against the bed from which it appears he has been trying to escape. Mom cuts a hazy figure behind them, but moves in as soon as he collapses, and takes his hand in a gesture he can see, but somehow cannot feel. The nurse says something and mom responds, but the words dance around and over him, all focus stolen by the rise and fall of his chest, the air he cannot taste, the breath he is not taking. His lungs expand, contract, and he's *breathing* through the *hole* in his *neck*.

"You're okay," mom says. "It's just a trach, it's perfectly safe."

Mom, he tries to say, and, *Oh god*, and also, *What the fuck?* None of these words make their way into existence. His lips form the shape, but there's no sound behind them, no air to exhale. The wave is long gone, broken over the shores of cold, stark reality, and Hitoshi is *drowning*.

"I know, I know, but you're okay, Hitoshi, you're going to be okay."

She pierces the undertow, slowly, the urgency of her voice laying hooks into him, dragging him back against it. Her slim, nail-bitten fingers are so tight they've gone white with strain. He squeezes back, headless of the way it pulls at the IV. Sensation bleeds back into his fingertips, and he forces his focus after it. Anywhere that isn't his neck, isn't the collar of bandages, isn't the plastic valve pressing up against the inside of his windpipe.

"Good, just like that. That's good." The words are tight, pained, like she's the one struggling to breathe. "You're doing so good, Hitoshi."

He isn't sure how long they stay like that, hands woven together and breath stuttering into rhythm. The other figures in the room swim through his eyes, but no one else tries to touch him. There's no screaming machinery or blaring alarms, no suffocating darkness or white-hot agony, and despite himself, despite the hole in his neck, despite everything, he *breathes*.

He raises his head, and pieces the room together as if seeing it for the first time. With it comes the sharp bite of understanding where he is, but not how he got here.

He extracts himself from mom's grip, fumbles until he can wrap his hands instead around the tools abandoned on the bedside table. He drags the whiteboard over his knees, shakily uncaps the marker, and begins to write.

Aizawa.

Shouta was 19 years old when he witnessed his first death.

He had been twenty minutes from the end of patrol, still fresh-faced despite the hour and glowing with pride at the weight of heroism around his young shoulders. When the call came in of a villain attack nearby, he was only too eager to be first on the scene.

The fight hadn't been long - the guy was fairly useless with his quirk snuffed out like a candle, but the car he'd flipped before Shouta had gotten there was much harder to put out, and though he dragged the woman inside from the smoking wreckage and dutifully started in on chest compressions, her blackened flesh and protruding bones had left little to work with. When his blood-slick hands lost her pulse for the third time, he hadn't been able to find it again.

Since then, he's seen enough fatal injuries to know with relative certainty when someone has well and truly reached the end of their mortal coil. He's witnessed an array of deaths - often up close, often gruesome. That first one was so horrible he had thought he would never get over it, but all these years later, the memory has been overlaid with so many others that he hardly thinks about it anymore.

The instances of a victim's passing have been filled with the perfunctory first aid and words of comfort, but between his quirk and his field kit, there's only so much he can do against the likes of cranial trauma and loss of limb. It took him a long time to come to terms with that, and longer still to learn not to take it home with him.

When Shouta last saw Hitoshi, there was none of that detachment, none of that clarity, none of that carefully curated border between

work and life, hero and man. There was only unbridled, unrelenting refusal - a denial that had felt like pushing back against the very earth, every sense and synapse and muscle in his body screaming dissent that the universe would even entertain the possibility of Hitoshi's death. He was 19-years-old again, tongue heavy with the taste of burnt flesh, delivering rescue breaths into an unresponsive mouth.

As the sirens had come careening their way, Shouta had come back to his senses. When he stepped back for the paramedics to lift Hitoshi onto the gurney, he'd known the kid would live, and that all the same, he would never forget that moment of doubt, and denial, and indescribable dread.

It's been a little over two days since then, and just under five since Hitoshi went missing. The first 72 hours were a blur of panicked planning and furious focus - orchestrating the exchange under Nedzu and Hagakure's guidance and privately steeling himself for any last-minute ambush or betrayal. Since then he's been fueled on little less than desperation and momentum, knowing the second he lets himself stop, he's going to crash *hard*.

Which is why he hasn't given himself that chance. Between Nedzu's office and the precinct and Saitama General, he's not sure the last time he had both feet inside his own home, let alone his bed. There are a million fires that still need putting out. Damage control and debriefing, recon and reintegration. He can, for the first time, begin planning for the future. He can, for the first time, *breathe*.

He can do nothing but worry.

Hitoshi is being kept in a private wing of Saitama General, heavily guarded with 24-hour medical surveillance and additional security at all entrances. The wider campus grounds have a rotating quota of Pros on localized patrol, and there are only a handful of medical personnel assigned to his care, all vouched-for and signed to strict confidentiality.

By some miracle, Hitoshi's rescue hasn't been leaked yet, though no thanks to QuirkBlog's apparent *inside source* at the Musutafu PD. The public knows about the League's old hideout, but not what was discovered there. Still, Shouta knows it's only a matter of time before that particular house of cards comes tumbling down. Whenever it does, Hitoshi's going to be battered in the fallout.

Shouta's sudden leave from work hasn't gone unnoticed either. Nedzu has already briefed the staff—a conversation he is *eternally* grateful not to have been a part of—but that's to say nothing of the students, who he can only imagine are taking every opportunity to harass their other teachers for details on Shouta's disappearance. And on top of all of that, there's still Hagakure.

Surely the students are wondering after her, worrying at her untouched desk and empty dorm and unanswered texts. All the invisibility in the world couldn't conceal such a sudden departure. For all that she strived to blend into the background, she was still their classmate, still their friend. At least she pretended to be.

Shouta owes them the truth, and being the one to break it. But he can't do it until he, Nedzu, Haru, and Tsukauchi have sorted out their story - which parts they need to bring to light and which they need to bury. They need to batter down the hatches, reinforce the barricades, ready the floodgates for the colossal PR scandal that is about to shit fury all over them. But they can't even do *that*. Not until Hitoshi wakes.

"Stay close to him. Keep me updated on any changes," Nedzu had said, rather than issue any kind of formal dismissal from work. "I'll look after UA, you look after Shinsou."

Look after. Right. Because he's done such a great job of that.

Even Tsukauchi's got his hands full, and can spare him little more than a pitying glance when he offers to help at the precinct just for something to *do*.

"Last time you and I did a stakeout together, I got shot, remember?" he brushes him off with a laugh. Shouta knows he must look a pathetic sight - fifteen years in the business, every spare hour of his time penciled in with work, and now he's untethered without it, anxiety like a starving thing tearing up the inside of his ribs.

He supposes this is how Toshinori must have felt. How he must still feel. Shouta doesn't dare reach out. The man must be furious, and has every reason to be. Shouta, in sane mind, sacrificed one child to the League of Villains in exchange for another. He had no right to do it - and he would again in a heartbeat.

It's dangerous, this type of thinking, this attachment he's formed to the kid, like some sort of twisted over-compensation for the ways he's failed him in the past. It's only going to complicate things, he knows,

but Shouta just can't bring himself to care . Hitoshi is safe. The how and the why don't matter.

It's on the heels of this self-admission that the text comes in from Haru, bolting him upright from an abandoned attempt at sleep. He's at Saitama General within the hour, and on Hitoshi's floor minutes later.

Haru meets him in the hall, eyes red and wet, mouth a hard line. It's the expression she's been wearing since they found him, half relief and half fury, twisted behind something eerily calm. Not cold, exactly, but closed-off in a way that, while entirely expected, still leaves the taste of regret on his tongue.

Shouta doesn't blame her one bit. She must despise him.

"He's awake?"

Haru nods once, and juts her chin towards the door. "He's asking for you."

There's a wheelchair folded at the foot of the bed, a monitor in one corner and an IV stand at attention in the other. Sunlight spills in through the open blinds and catches in the IV bag, gleaming off plastic and the clear, watery glow of the medication. Shouta's eyes follow the light, tracing it backwards where it dapples over the sheets, little puddles forming in the creases like water around a stone, as he works up his courage. Finally, he meets pale skin, dark eyes - an origami swan, all sharp corners and fragile lines, bruising around his nose indicative of fractures, neck swaddled in bandages with the tracheostomy tube poking out.

He remembers the way Hitoshi's head had lolled in the snow, flayed skin and raw, exposed flesh, the sight screaming with the touch of decay. He remembers that same touch on his own arm not long ago - remembers the agony.

He dismantles the memory, the anger, breathes it out with a stoicism summoned from years of unflinching, dry-eyed stares. He looks long and hard, like he deserves to have to.

Hitoshi's eyes are fever-bright, pupils blown wide. They probably have

him on a metric ton of painkillers, and he blinks owlshly, fighting their effects. There's no reaction to his entrance, and Shouta isn't entirely sure Hitoshi even knows he's there until at last he swivels that vacant stare down to the whiteboard in his lap, and writes, in a weak but determined hand:

Hagakure.

Shouta isn't certain whether Hitoshi fully processed or was even aware of what happened during the hostage exchange. He knows only that Hitoshi and Hagakure had contact over the winter break, and assumes that they developed some kind of close relationship in that time. But he has no idea what the nature of that relationship looked like, or what impression of the exchange Hitoshi was left with, or, really, what he's even trying to convey right now - if it's a question or an accusation or simply a statement of fact.

"We know," he says at last. "We know it was her."

Hitoshi's expression does something complicated then, eyes skittering across Shouta's face before resettling on the whiteboard. His fingers clench around the marker. He writes, beneath her name: *Where?*

"She's with the League," he says gently. "We don't know where they are."

Hitoshi looks up sharply, searching his face again in rapid calculation. Then, abruptly, his expression goes lax, mind miles away.

Shouta continues slowly. "She turned herself in. She told us everything. At her suggestion, we orchestrated an exchange with the League - her freedom for yours."

There's no visible reaction. Hitoshi is so still it makes a momentary statue of him. At last, he blinks, and slowly lowers the whiteboard, lays it out across his thighs. The marker slips from his hand and rolls for the edge. Shouta darts forward before it can fall.

Hitoshi fingers twitch, breath hitching against the trach.

Shouta pretends not to have noticed. He gently places the marker onto the bedside table. They're much closer than they were a moment ago - Shouta's back to the room. *Bad sightlines*, some ancient instinct whispers along his spine. But Hitoshi's right there - that tiny tremble in his hands, the rest of him so carefully still. Shouta's breath could ruffle his hair, if he wasn't holding it.

“You’re not in trouble. For any of it,” he says quietly. “You’re safe. I’m going to take care of the rest.”

Hitoshi’s eyes glisten, welling tears the only sign Shouta’s been heard in his otherwise unmoving face. Shouta holds the gaze. Really *looks*. But Hitoshi’s shuttered, and even the painkillers and confusion and exhaustion do nothing to lower that barrier, to bridge that gap. He’s missing so much, so much context, so much information that they desperately need, but he can’t bring himself to pry it out of Hitoshi yet, not when he’s looking at him like that, expression so perfectly curated to hide the fear that still bleeds like an open wound from beneath.

Hitoshi’s safe. *That’s* what matters. The rest can wait.

Shouta makes his retreat, schooling himself just long enough to pass Haru in the hall before he all but flies to the stairwell. The rooftop beckons - he’s never wanted a smoke so bad in his whole miserable life.

He’s still got Hitoshi’s stolen pack in his pocket, half-empty and crumpled to hell. His hands dive after it, but emerge instead with his phone, lit up and buzzing angrily.

“This place is confusing and they’re not letting me past the security check,” Tsukauchi says without greeting. “Come down to the parking lot.”

Shouta grits his teeth. “Which one?”

“Uh, I don’t know. There’s a sign that says, *no flash photography*.”

Shouta knows the one, having fairly memorized the campus by this point. He ends the call and pockets the phone, patting the smoke carton in consolation.

He’s somewhat mollified by the sight of Tsukauchi looking at least half as miserable as him, snow-dusted and sagging under the weight of an overstuffed laptop bag, hand outstretched in a peace offering.

Shouta forgoes thanks and simply downs the coffee like an animal

dying of thirst. Tsukauchi sips his own with considerably more civility, and gives him the perfunctory thirty seconds to bask in the afterglow of caffeine before he speaks.

“How’s the kid?”

“Awake.”

“He said anything?”

“He can’t.” Shouta taps the base of his throat, where the trach sits.

Tsukauchi nods. He’s been made aware of the extent of the injuries, Shouta’s sure. No such thing as patient confidentiality, where Nedzu’s involved. “We’re gonna have to debrief him either way. We need to know what he knows.”

What he knows about the League.

Tsukauchi’s not wrong - they’re a ghost in the wind, at this point. Since the exchange, it’s been radio silence. They’d been preparing for a move even before they’d discovered Hitoshi’s betrayal, but whether they’ve stuck with the original plan or gone deep underground is anyone’s guess. Shouta wouldn’t be surprised at the latter, considering the hit they just took. They’re probably cutting all their loose ends before Hitoshi has a chance to reveal them, and in another life, he would have given a fuck.

“I’ll let you know when he’s ready.”

“And the trial for Chisaki Kai. If he’s up for it, I want Shinsou on the stands.”

Shouta hums. “If he’s up for it.”

Tsukauchi clicks his tongue, but doesn’t press the matter further. “How’s the good doctor?”

Shouta blows out a long breath. He thinks of her screams when he told her they’d lost Hitoshi, the way her fists had beat against his chest. Her sobs, when they’d found him three days later, how she’d buried her face where he still bore the bruises.

“Angry,” he settles for.

“I’ll bet. She gonna sue?”

She'd be well within her right. He chances a glance toward her office window, but it's only shuttered windows and the reflected the glint of snow. "No idea."

"Nedzu thinks she might."

"Yeah, Nedzu thinks a lot of things," he mutters. He slants his eyes to Tsukauchi. "You talked to him recently?"

"Every hour on the hour," Tsukauchi says, and pats the phone in his pocket. "Got *him* a coffee this morning too. He's being... oddly patient. We're all in limbo. Waiting on the kid."

"Like I said, I'll let you know when he's ready."

Tsukauchi nods. "Well, that's about all the free time I have for the next—" he checks his watch, "--year. So, I'm off." He tips back the last of his coffee and tosses the cup into the nearby trash can, then unzips his bag. "One last thing."

He produces a manila folder, crisp and unmarked. "Thought I'd get a head start on the psych profile for our, uh, *new* traitor. The guys in forensics will have even less to go on than they did with Shinsou. Still, I found some interesting stuff on the parents." He hands him the folder. "Feel free to compare notes."

Shouta accepts it, slim and impossibly light. He can't imagine it's more than a few pages. Hell, he thinks humourlessly, they don't even have her *picture* .

So much missing, and most of what they *thought* they knew was a lie.

He tucks it under his arm without looking.

Yeah. That can wait too.

Chapter End Notes

TW for this chapter: POV character is intubated via trach (the procedure does not take place on-screen) and experiences a panic attack.

Ready

Chapter Notes

TW for brief mention of needles near the middle of the chapter

Hitoshi dozes the rest of the day and well into the next. Clarity pays him sporadic visits, but mostly seems happy to abandon him to the whims of whatever's coursing through his IV, unable to do much else than watch the clouds smear across the sky.

Dreams come between long bouts of nothingness, sudden bursts of colour and sound - senseless and loud. He wakes on the second day as if from a broken fever, dizzy and drenched in sweat.

The clouds have broken apart to sleet gray and pale blue. The IV bag has collapsed in on itself, nearly empty. Clarity sits like a brick on his chest.

Mom makes herself known in the corner of his vision, purse and coat slung across the back of her chair, disposable coffee cups littering the floor at her feet, a clear sign of how long she's been there. Her eyes are bright despite it, and Hitoshi can feel the weight of her immediate attention, drawn by the slightest twitch or change of breath or some cosmic, motherly sixth sense. She gives a small, watery smile, meets his gaze and searches for lucidity, and freezes when she finds it.

She moves in slow motion. Empty hands splay in her lap, palms up, then creep to the bedrail. Telegraphing each movement, like she's afraid he might flinch away.

He isn't sure he won't, until her warm, calloused palm is suddenly sliding over his, and the cool-familiar rush of her quirk blooms through him, a hummingbird's wing beat, the soft, rapidfire stutter of *love love love*.

Hi, he moves his mouth in a silent greeting, and forcibly relaxes his throat against the sensation of the trach. Spit gathers at the corners of his mouth, and he works methodically to swallow it back, tongue running along the cracked, dry ridges of his lips.

Mom watches him carefully. "I can ask them to bring you some water. One of the nurses can show you how to swallow. It'll feel weird with

the trach but it's perfectly safe." And then, after a beat, "It's not permanent."

She bites back the rest, but Hitoshi sees it brewing beneath the surface. The mother instinct warring against the doctor instinct - wanting to comfort without making any promises.

He nods, and mom seems to take a moment to remember this is the only response he's capable of. She makes an aborted move for the whiteboard, but Hitoshi waves her off. He has nothing to say.

Sleep takes him again before long, a fight he concedes easily. His dreams are fitful, the darkness behind his eyes disorienting. Each time he sloughs them off, mom is there, that same pained expression and too-careful posture.

The nurse comes, as promised, to coach him through coaxing down liquids. He feels like a toddler taking his first steps, clumsy and drooling, muscle memory warring with the memory of pain and taste of blood, but after a few minutes of muted choking, he manages the feat.

There's little time for celebration. The nurse hums over his throat and prods at his feet, changes his dressings and clears the mucus out his trach, replaces his IV bag and fiddles with the dosage, by which point Hitoshi's too winded to even worry that she's lowering it. Finally, she drags him into a collapsible wheelchair and steers him to the bathroom, and he feels like he should be embarrassed, but he's only *exhausted*. And confused. Where's Nedzu? Where's Aizawa?

He knows he spoke with Aizawa yesterday - briefly, and without actually speaking. The details are murky and disjointed, but he got what he needed.

Hagakure's gone.

He rolls the words through his head carefully, testing the weight, trying to wring the sense from it. Hagakure's gone. She traded went back to the League. She went traded herself. For him.

She didn't want to. He *knows* she didn't want to. Even if she wouldn't admit it to him, couldn't quite yet admit it to herself. She wanted an out. She could have had it.

But she went back. For him.

His fingers tense around the wheelchair's armrests. The wave of rage and shame surges so high he can barely see straight. If he were standing, he's sure he would collapse.

Everything he had hoped about helping her, showing her the way back, proving that society can accept and forgive her, is gone. Because of him. She's back right where she started, in deeper than ever. Because of *him* . His mistakes. His stupidity. She saved his life. He *destroyed* hers.

He stares at himself in the plastic mirror above the bathroom sink - sallow skin and sunken eyes and cracked, spittle-dry lips. The bandages sit like a noose around his neck. He looks nothing like the courageous hero or even the devious traitor he pretended so long to be. He looks defeated, voiceless, pathetic.

You're not in trouble. I'm going to take care of the rest.

What the fuck does that mean. The rest of what.

Every mistake he made was his own. He joined the League. Fought their battles, bought their propaganda. Hell, he helped *amplify* it, to god knows how many others. If he's not in trouble, then he sure as hell deserves to be.

Maybe that's why Aizawa doesn't want to talk to him. Maybe he's as embarrassed of Hitoshi as he is of himself. Maybe they don't need him anymore. Clearly they found out the traitor's identity without him anyway. Maybe all Hitoshi did was make them lose her.

Does Shigaraki know she gave herself up? Is he angry? Is he going to hurt her, too? No one would know, if he did. No one would *care* . No one but him.

Do Aizawa and Nedzu know where the League went? Have they already found them? Is that why no one's questioning him? Do they already know everything he does? Did Hagakure tell them?

And the exchange - was it publicized? How are they going to explain it to the media? To her classmates? To her parents? Does everyone already know about the traitor? About Hagakure? About him?

I'm going to take care of the rest.

The nurse helps him back into the wheelchair with utter detachment - no affection, no fear, just practiced professionalism. She wheels him

back to bed. A private room. No guards. No restraints.

What the fuck is going on? The media would be all over him if they knew he was back in hero custody. Hell, he would be in *prison* . Everything is too calm, too pristine, and he's suddenly dizzy, his pulse a roar in the quiet.

He doesn't know where he stands or what he's supposed to be doing, what the plan is and whether he has a role in it he needs to fill, who's watching and what they expect to see.

He crawls back into bed, panting from the strain, dry air wheezing in and out of the *fucking hole* in his throat. His neck *itches*, and he digs at the gauze and straps, finds the skin beneath wet and scabbing and hot. He presses his nails into the pain.

"Hitoshi."

Mom's hand on his elbow, her voice firm. He lets her drag him away from the wound, drag his head back above the water. She's frowning, the corners of her eyes creased in worry and exhaustion and regret. He wants his voice back. He wants to ask. Are you angry with me? Who else knows I'm here? Where the *fuck* is Aizawa?

He grasps for the whiteboard and marker, stares at them and feels his thoughts unraveling a mile a minute. It isn't enough. He has too much to say, too much to ask, all of it screaming through him, clamoring for release .

Mom procures a notebook from the one of the hospital storerooms, and within seconds Hitoshi has the spine cracked and smoothed over his knee. He runs a shaking hand down the page and leaves it darkened with sweat. Where does he even start?

They'll want a timeline, probably. Of where he was, what he saw, who was there. They'll want details - the little things he couldn't afford to waste valuable space on before.

He thinks of the crumpled edges of an unrolled cigarette, ink-stained and so crammed with writing it had been nearly illegible. He tries to conjure that now - the same focused determination to get it all out, get

it all down, the words thrumming under his skin. Like it meant something. Like it mattered.

Mountainside Hotel, he begins confidently. The rest of the words are slow to follow. *Fifteen residents. Supplies delivered every 2-3 days. It was their home.*

He pauses, stares at the page until it blurs, then adds, *Kurogiri showed me around.*

They liked to play billiards. Twice always won. His first personality lured you in, and his second milked you for all you were worth.

He wonders if that matters too. The little signs of life, of normality, of family. He doubts it.

He keeps writing.

The sky falls dark by the time he reaches the last page. They've turned off the overheads in favour of a lamp on the bedside table. It gives the room a yellow glow, hazy and strangely hollow where mom's chair sits empty, long since shooed away by the nurse.

The IV drips more slowly than before, the needle tugging at his skin like the worry that worms its way inside him the longer he watches. They must have lowered it after all. Everything feels sharper, realer, his mind still buzzing with the words he can't say. Sleep takes a long time to find him.

That night, he dreams. Invisible restraints pin his arms above his head. Black smoke in his lungs, the taste of blood in his mouth. Shigaraki asks him question after question, but there's a hole in his throat and his words come out soundless - Hitoshi can't make sense of them.

He wakes and he's certain he's dying, choking on plastic and the invisible hands he can still feel around his wrists. There's a high, keening sound coming from the monitors. Lights dance and spark on the switchboard above his head.

He jolts as a shadow falls over the bed, but it's just the nurse. She says meaningless platitudes, adjusts the dosage and slowly retreats. Hitoshi

sags back, and plummets into merciful, dreamless unconsciousness.

In the morning, a collection of doctors come to examine his throat.

They remove the dressings, glare and prod at the skin beneath with sterile, gloved hands. At last, they tell him they're going to plug the trach to see if he can breathe without it temporarily. If he can last twelve hours, they'll remove it completely.

They seal the valve, mom's hand tight around his like he's six years old and crossing a busy street. He's embarrassed until he suddenly isn't, squeezing for dear life when his lungs constrict and his head swims.

Mom inhales loudly beside him, and Hitoshi remembers that his mouth exists.

Cold air hits the back of his throat and he sputters, coughs and coughs and *coughs*, and finally straightens out. Ragged breath rattles though his teeth, face tingling from the rush of oxygen. He grins, giddy and lightheaded.

Mom catches the smile and beams it back. Then, she starts to cry.

"Sorry, it's fine, I'm fine," she says, and turns away, swiping at her face before she outright buries it in her hands.

Hitoshi stares, helpless and wide-eyed as her shoulders hitch with barely stifled sobs. He scrambles for the whiteboard, scrawls in huge blocky characters, *I'M SORRY*, and shoves it under her face.

She peeks up at the whiteboard, and cries harder.

Panic blooms behind his ribs. He throws the board aside and catches her wrist, pinning her in place when she moves to rise. "Mm," he manages.

"Oh, honey, no," she soothes. "It's okay, I'm being silly." She gives a forced laugh. "Just ignore me."

"M-mom," he croaks. "Fine. 'M *fine*."

She smears at her eyes with the back of her wrist, fighting for

composure. "I know."

He shakes his head, pleading. His tongue is a deadweight, the words fighting their way out against it. *I'm okay*, he wants to say, and, *Please don't cry*, and, *I'm so sorry, so fucking sorry, that I did this to you, that I left you, that I put you through this*. That it still wasn't enough, that he still *failed*, despite it all. The media prying and the headlines smearing and the worry that must have eaten her alive the whole time, the weight of his secrets and his lies and his recklessness and his pride, falling to her shoulders. *I'm okay*, he wants to say, and maybe he doesn't deserve to be, but he *is* - he's okay, and he's here, and he really, *really* doesn't want to see her cry.

She retracts her hand from his grip, places it instead on the curve of his cheek, so, so gentle, her thumb swiping at the skin like she could paint over the bruising there. The touch comes with the memory of a far heavier hand, the crack of flesh and taste of blood and bile that followed, but he swallows the flinch and holds himself still beneath her touch.

It slips over him without conscious thought - the mask, the forced calm, the cold calculous. The same kind he would have used on Kurogiri. He looks up at her, and reveals another smile, this one small, practiced and light, an affection that promises its reserved for her and no one else.

He wonders, for a moment, if her quirk can feel it - the lie swimming just below the surface of his skin. But after a second of searching his face, her shoulders relax, the tears stayed, and Hitoshi knows she's bought it.

He slips into the mask, and doesn't let it drop.

Haru steps outside the hospital pavilion into the glow of sunset, purse slung over her shoulder and steps hurried against the evening chill.

Shouta tries desperately not to feel like a creep as he watches her from the rooftop, but his machinations die a quick death when she pauses at her car and lifts a hand against the glaring chrome of the building. Her shadowed gaze swivels to his hiding spot as though drawn by a magnet. She arches an eyebrow.

There's no surprise behind the motion, and Shouta wonders for a moment if she could feel him through her quirk. Can she sense emotions from that far away?

He slinks down from his perch guiltily. She unlocks the car, ducks inside and turns over the engine, and sits there, watching his approach through the windshield.

There's an awkward pause, an internal debate that wages far too long, and Shouta reluctantly crawls into the passenger side after her. She has the heat on high, a little coconut-scented air freshener dangling from the rearview, sweetening the air by degrees.

"They're going to decannulate him tomorrow," she says flatly.

Shouta blinks.

"Take the trach out," she translates.

"Ah," he says. "That's good."

"It is," she says. "They'll keep him overnight and do another scan tomorrow, but if everything looks okay, they'll discharge him by Tuesday."

"That's good," he says again, stupidly.

"He was very lucky." She straightens, takes a long breath and recites, "Acute trauma to the left sternocleidomastoid and the trachea, but they avoided the carotid artery completely. They were aiming for the larynx." She bites out the next words. "They made an effort to keep him alive."

Shouta sits with that for a second, letting his body first unravel then carefully refold the tangle of guilt and hatred that seems to have made a home behind his sternum. His fingers twitch to massage at the ache, but he doesn't let them.

"The girl who traded herself for him," Haru continues. "Do we know what happened to her?"

Shouta picks a point in the middle distance and scowls. "The League will have attributed her capture to Hitoshi. Unless she gives them reason to believe otherwise, they'll think he was the one who sold her out. They have no reason to hurt her." It's a slightly nicer way of saying, *I have no fucking clue*, but not by much.

She's the reason Hitoshi's alive, Haru doesn't say, and doesn't have to. She's the reason Hitoshi's alive, and for that, she went free. Whatever happens to her next is out of their control.

His fingers find his chest anyway, knuckles digging where the bruises have almost faded.

Haru eyes the motion without comment, then drops her gaze to the purse in her lap. She rifles through it and emerges with a notebook, spine cracked and pages stiff with ink. "Hitoshi wanted you to have this."

Shouta accepts the offering. He almost doesn't want to ask. Surely, it's too soon. Surely, Hitoshi deserves to rest, to *heal*, just a little longer. But he can feel Nedzu's silent judgement, Tsukauchi's impatience like an echo in the back of his head. *We're all in limbo. Waiting on the kid.*

"He's ready to talk?"

Her lips are a thin line, like the answer pains her just as much. "He's ready to try."

Shouta goes home.

The apartment is cold and shuttered, week-old dishes stacked high and bed unmade from however the fuck long ago he last crawled into it. He avoids the temptation now, and settles at the futon instead. He lowers Hitoshi's notebook onto the coffee table beside Hagakure's file—still untouched—and a half-empty bottle of scotch. He flips to the first page of each - the empty photograph and the sprawling words.

He settles in for the long night ahead.

Useful

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shigaraki comes to ask him questions.

Yes or no. Silence earns him a strike to the right ear. Pleading earns him the left.

“Yes or no,” Shigaraki sneers, and Hitoshi's vision spots red and brown.

Yes, he nods, choking on spit and tears.

No, he cries, muffled through the gag.

I don't know, please, please, he begs, and his ears ring and ring and *ring*, left right left.

Nedzu comes to ask him questions too.

But he, at least, lets Hitoshi keep the marker.

The doctors had unplugged the trach overnight, in case he suffocated in his sleep, but have resealed it this morning. Hitoshi has produced a staggering four sentences since then - voice raspy and weak, each word like the scratch of nails against his throat. But he can manage a *yes* or a *no*, and has the marker, for when the answers are more complicated than that.

There are three other figures in the room. Nedzu, Aizawa, and a man Nedzu introduces as *Detective Tsukauchi*.

Hitoshi wonders if there are more people involved in their less-than-legal proceedings, or if this is the extent of his PR team. He hopes it is - he'd rather know the scope of the audience he's performing for than be blind on the stage.

The marker is his knife, the whiteboard his shield. He closes his fists

around them and surveys his battlefield.

The detective sits comfortably, his legs crossed with a pen tablet balanced over his knee, where he's already scratching notes despite the fact that nothing's been said yet. On the table next to him rests Hitoshi's notebook, with what looks like a stack of photocopied pages beside it, annotated and dog-eared. He knows mom gave it to Aizawa, which means Aizawa must have given it to the detective, and he's apparently wasted no time delving in. If they're willing to trust him with that much, then they're willing to trust him with it all. He's clearly a bigger part of this than Hitoshi thought.

Aizawa has, as usual, opted not to sit. He stands the furthest across the room, back to the wall, like it always is when he's trying to survey a scene. Hitoshi used to find it odd, but seeing it now, it strikes him as obvious. The projected distance, the fixed-point stare. Of course Aizawa likes to have eyes on the whole room; that's when he's most powerful.

Lastly, there's Nedzu, perched on a surgical tray in the center of the room like a spider at the center of its web. He gives little away at a glance, but Hitoshi knows this routine by now. The cracks will appear the second he starts monologuing.

All the same, Hitoshi straightens, mirroring Nedzu's posture to show that he's keen and alert and taking this seriously.

The situation has evidently developed, since last he was in the same room as Nedzu and Aizawa. There's no script here, no cues - nothing but the image of control Nedzu so easily projects, which Hitoshi knows he must pretend to believe. In truth, he has no idea where he stands with any of the people in this room, or how their plans for him have changed. Only that he has to be useful. He has to convince them he's still useful.

"Let me begin by saying that we are all extremely glad to have you here with us, safe once more," Nedzu says at length. "I understand that your injuries are healing well, all things considered. Though I wish we could have waited for your full recovery, we have some urgent matters to attend to, and they require insight that only you possess." He smiles, all benevolence and charm, and offers a perfunctory, "If at any point the questions we ask become distressing for you, please let us know at once. It's no problem at all to take a break. Do you understand?"

Hitoshi nods. Yes. That one's easy. See, Shigaraki? No violence necessary.

Nedzu folds his hands, and the smile slips away. He fixes Hitoshi with a solemn look. "Shinsou, you have spent a great deal of time in the company of the League, and it's completely understandable that you may have formed strong attachments to them as individuals. I want you to rest assured that whatever information you share about them here will be used to bring them to justice, not to harm."

A strange reaction takes place in his body at these words. Something like anger sinks through his bones. What does Nedzu know about the League, about *them as individuals* , he thinks, bitterly, in a voice that doesn't sound like his own. The thought is unexpected, the vehemence behind it equally so. Hitoshi quickly packs it away, and doesn't react except to nod his head in another placid yes .

"Wonderful," Nedzu says curtly. "Let's start at the beginning."

Nedzu has him run through a summary of his first weeks with the League. Where he was and who he saw, what was preached and what they left unspoken, how and when he followed along, and the few, heart-pounding moments he dared to slip the leash.

It's a slow process, with Hitoshi's limited speech and reliance on the whiteboard, and mostly consists of prompting questions, which he either confirms or clarifies. This will be their third time getting this information - first from his intell drops, then from the notebook, and now in-person. Hitoshi almost wonders if they're just trying to catch him in a lie.

The questions turn to Shihori Park, to the heist at Golden Heights, to the League's larger plans - did they mention where they were going next, did they have another target, what was their *goal*. It's even slower here, and the level of detail required has him writing in full sentences for most of it. *They liked the publicity, the relatability. They wanted to be listened to, they wanted to be seen.* There's a steadily growing pile of tissues crumpled at the foot of his bed, stained red from repeatedly wiping the whiteboard clean.

Afterwards, the detective scoots forward in his chair. "Hey, Shinsou.

Nice to finally meet you. I've heard a lot." He gives him a conspiratorial smile. "Couple questions for you, okay?" He flips the notebook open to a middle page somewhere in the middle. "You mentioned a safehouse in Akasaka. Do you remember any details about this place?"

He rolls the marker between his fingers in thought, then writes, *Townhome. Run-down. Two stories + basement.* He pauses, runs the mental map through his head, and sketches a quick floor plan. He labels the windows - which looked over the street, and which looked over the alley.

When he's finished, Tsukauchi pinches the whiteboard between his fingers, careful not to smudge. He rakes his eyes across it, like it's a delicate artifact. With one hand, he slides open the camera on his phone. "May I?"

Hitoshi waits while Tsukauchi steadies the image, and takes a second to switch his focus to Aizawa. He still hasn't said a word.

Aizawa stares straight back. Hitoshi kills the urge to duck and instead holds the gaze evenly, letting Aizawa project whatever he wants. *What are you looking for?* He'd show it to him, if only he knew.

He pulls away when Tsukauchi hands him back the board. "Didn't happen to get a street address, did you?"

Hitoshi erases his creation, and tosses another tissue to the foot of the bed. The board is streaked from over-use, white tinted red like blood on snow. He shakes his head, licks his lips, and tries, "Only there once."

His voice comes haltingly, in a whisper, like it has every time before. In the corner of his eye, Aizawa's mouth tugs into frown.

"You said there were others like that one?"

Nod yes .

"Didn't get any more house tours, did you?"

It's phrased as a joke, but Hitoshi hears the hint of fervor behind it. So they don't know where the League has gone, after all. He hesitates, but can't forestall the inevitable.

He shakes his head. For all that he knew, he still knew so little. Half in

the dark.

Tsukauchi doesn't look surprised. He trades a quick glance with Nedzu, then his posture changes - he leans forward, a wrinkle of pity in his brow. "What about the place they kept you, at the end? Did you get any sense of where you were?"

A thin crack of light he knows must be the door. The distance between it curls and beckons, singing its lie, promising it's just out of reach. If he could just get his feet under him, if he could just slip the cuffs—

The light flickers, a passing shadow. Footsteps beyond. Footsteps above. Where are they coming from? His pulse is a storm, the shriek of tinnitus, his ears clogged with blood, everything muffled.

The room closes in now, smaller, tighter. He can't breathe past the noose of fear and stench of his own sweat and piss, tracing paths down his legs like bugs crawling over skin. Any second now, the footsteps will come pounding like thunder. Any second now, the door will flood open with light. Any second now, someone will come for him. Any second.

He blinks. Stares down at the board. Yes or no.

His throat bobs against the plastic. He shakes his head. *No no no.*

Tsukauchi hums sympathetically. He sits back, busies himself with flipping to another page while Hitoshi collects himself. He drags a finger down the slanted lines and settles over a name. "This guy, Giran. You said he was their broker? What's that mean?"

Finances, Hitoshi writes, eager for the distraction. *Recruitment.*

"Did he ever mention ties with other organizations?"

Yakuza. Local gangs.

"Eight Precepts?"

Nod yes.

"Good to know." Tsukauchi circles something in his own notes, pocketing that bit of information for later.

It dawns on him suddenly that Tsukauchi must be the one working the legal case. Nedzu and Aizawa have been implicated from the beginning, and relied on secrecy as much as Hitoshi. If that hasn't changed, then clearly his return from the League is still under wraps,

leaving Tsukauchi the only one capable of actually pursuing their leads right now.

Giran didn't spend much time with the League, he scrawls hastily. Had a house in Iwate. Had a life. Then, carefully, Was the one who recruited Hagakure.

It's this, at last, that earns a reaction from Aizawa. His eyebrows draw together, then shoot up into his hairline.

Tsukauchi considers this. "The house in Iwate - can you sketch that too?"

He does, eyeing Aizawa from beneath his lashes as he does, but the man's stoic facade has returned.

"Iwate's pretty quiet, for the League," Tsukauchi confers with Nedzu. "Maybe that's where they've gone to ground?"

"Doubtful, if they know Shinsou knows about it," Nedzu sighs. "Still, it's certainly worth sending a team."

Tsukauchi turns back to him. "You said Giran was quirkless?"

Nod yes.

"Does he have any weapons in the house?"

He shrugs. Probably. That, or the entire League of Villains.

He finishes the drawing, and Tsukauchi takes another picture, then writes another note on his tablet, the screen tilted from view. Hitoshi wrings his hands, picking at the callouses between his thumb and forefinger. Abruptly, he's reminded of his old sketchbook, shredded and abandoned to the bottom of a dumpster. His lip twitches in muted embarrassment, remembering the sketches he'd drawn of Aizawa, still star-struck by having been graced with the attention of a pro.

He can feel Aizawa's stare again, but pretends not to notice. He wishes Aizawa would say something. He wishes *he* could say something. He feels like an actor who's forgotten their lines, stupid and slack-jawed in the spotlight. A jittery feeling takes root in his chest, sending fine tremors out across his body. He eyes the slow drip of the IV. Weaning off again.

"When exactly did you learn about Hagakure?" Tsukauchi asks, and

hands him back the whiteboard.

Winter break, Hitoshi writes. The words nearly betray his trembling, and he fists the marker tight. *I was high when I met her*, he thinks, humourlessly, and doesn't add.

"How long ago did she join them?"

Few years. She was young. God, he doesn't even know how young. It would have been before middle school. He tries to envision their first meeting - if it was anything like his, if she was as terrified as he had been. What they said, to win her over. If they stoked her anger, or commiserated her pain. The common ground, the shared ideals, the hatred for the uncultured corruption of hero society. She'd have known it all too well.

"The plan to enroll her at UA was an attempt to get close to All Might, correct?" Nedzu interjects. "Did they ever give you any reason to believe there were any additional motives? Further recruitment, perhaps?"

He shakes his head. It was always about All Might - the Symbol of Peace, and all he represented. Shigaraki knew they could never face him head on and win. They'd needed an in, to get close to him, to strike when his guard was down.

It's where I'm most useful, Hagakure had said. *Covert work.* Deception.

It was Giran's idea, he writes unprompted, almost defensively.

Nedzu hums, unconvinced. He glares, tiny marble eyes deep in thought.

Tsukauchi nudges him. "There are easier places to recruit would-be-villains than a school for heroes."

"Yet they leapt at the chance to recruit Shinsou, and Bakugou Katsuki before him. Both students of remarkable ability," Nedzu says. "So I am forced to consider the possibility that they may have attempted to turn others of similar caliber, of which there are plenty to be found within UA's ranks."

It's not like that, Hitoshi wants to say. They don't just go for strength - they go for the exiled, the like-minded. Those who have been burned by hero society, or cast out from it before they had a chance to try. Those with quirks meant to hurt, or manipulate, or deceive. Those

who can't show the bruises. *A declaration of sympathy*, Kurogiri had called it, and who wouldn't ache to hear that, after so long without an ounce of it?

"What about Shigaraki Tomura?" Tsukauchi asks, before any of those words can fight their way past Hitoshi's lips. He pats the notebook. "You didn't write much about him. What's his relationship with the rest of the League?"

He swallows mechanically, feels a tendon jump in his jaw and forcibly unclenches it. The jittery feeling dives lower - from his chest to his uneasy stomach, like the vestiges of some long-forgotten fight or flight instinct. *Shigaraki*, he writes, *didn't like me very much*.

Tsukauchi's face creases in discomfort, the stilted type of pity reserved for strangers. "He's the one that hurt you?"

Not the only one. Toga took the knife to his feet. He can still see her down there, the glint of her teeth, bathed in red. A test, Shigaraki had called it, of her loyalty. In an odd way, he was touched by her split-second hesitation, by the fact that she had ever liked him enough that Shigaraki had felt the need to make certain she was still willing to hurt him.

He wonders why Shigaraki hadn't demanded the same of Kurogiri. Did he simply trust him more? Or had Kurogiri refused?

I would never hurt a child simply for the pleasure of it.

There was discord, he writes. *Shigaraki wasn't a good leader.*

"Hitoshi."

He jolts. Aizawa has taken a half-step across the room. "It's okay. We can take a break."

He glances down at the board, where he's pressed so hard that the felt tip of the marker has split. The words are spiked like a heart monitor, the last few characters slanted and nearly illegible.

Fear sits bitter at the back of his throat. He swallows past it. Shakes his head no.

Aizawa looks caught between approach and retreat, and Hitoshi wonders if he's going to force the matter. He would be defenseless against it, unable to do anything but concede, but Aizawa doesn't take

the opening. He steps back, laying the distance between them anew.

Nedzu steals his focus back. "What about Kurogiri?"

Hitoshi stares. What about him?

"Was he a source of this discord?"

Sometimes. Never intentionally. He was the peace-keeper, the mother hen, the most dangerous of them all and the one who kept them together despite it. Hitoshi shakes his head, gives a helpless shrug, unable to put it to words.

Nedzu's mouth purses. "I've often wondered if Shigaraki's throne was destined to topple. His position as leader was inherited from his predecessor, not necessarily earned. He has potential, certainly, but he's still young. Unstable." He fixes Hitoshi with a long, calculating look. "He was unable to even see past his own ego how valuable of a resource you truly presented to him."

Tsukauchi tilts his head. "You think he might be in for a power struggle?"

"Perhaps," Nedzu says. "The League has just suffered a great blow to morale. It's possible that some of their members may be feeling... resentful."

"Or feeling lucky," Tsukauchi adds thoughtfully.

They're the words of an outsider, of someone who knows the League only as power-hungry villains, but nothing of *them as individuals*. He'd have thought it too, at the start of it all. Now, he wants to take Nedzu by the shoulders and shake him. He scowls at the marker, the words churning in his mind and behind his tongue.

"Kurogiri is... an idealist," he chokes out. He *knows* Shigaraki's a bad leader, just like he knows the rest of their flaws - some reclusive and selfish, some manic and cruel. All of them, broken. But he doesn't *care*. "He sees himself as-- as their... *protector*." The words tear their way out against the pain. "It's not about power. It's about family."

Dabi wants control, Spinner wants respect. Toga's in it for the thrill, Compress for the prestige. They're *people*, before they're villains. They're not interchangeable.

He chokes on the rest of the words, unable to force them, but Nedzu

pauses, head cocked in consideration, as if heard them anyway.

“Thank you for your insight, Shinsou,” he says at last. "I think we’ve heard enough for now.”

Chapter End Notes

Some facts:

1) According to canon, Giran actually isn't quirkless. Whoops, but also, who cares?

2) It's entirely possible to speak with a plugged trach, though it's somewhat tricky and in real life can take quite some time to learn. Forgive me for sacrificing medical accuracy in favour of advancing the plot. Still - a cool thing to be able to do! Yay Hitoshi!

Thanks for reading :)

In the Eye

Chapter Notes

I'm alive bitch

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

With the interrogation over, Tsukauchi gathers his notes and takes his leave, Nedzu quick on his heels and uncharacteristically quiet. Hitoshi stares hard at the blankets piled in his lap as they leave, trying not to let the unease bleed through. He can picture them, no more than five feet out of earshot and likely already pouring over their findings. He can only hope his performance stands up to inspection.

He wonders, for one delirious moment, whether Aizawa might linger behind to speak in private, but the man follows the others to the threshold, glancing back only long enough to give Hitoshi a terse nod.

“Try to get some rest.”

He isn't nearly so lucky.

His eyes pulse with exhaustion, thrumming where the painkillers seem to be helping less and less by the second, yet his mind refuses to give in to the lure of sleep, instead re-conjuring the past hour from all angles. Did he give them what they wanted? Did they even believe a word of it? Aizawa had said he's not in trouble, but then, that doesn't make him any less of an accomplice to the League's actions. Or is he simply a victim of circumstance in their eyes, battered and maimed and no longer of use? Somehow, the idea frightens him even more.

His return is still clearly being kept from the public, but surely the secrecy won't last long. Nedzu didn't hint at much of a fallout plan, but he must have one.

Whatever story he plans to spin, Hitoshi has no idea in what light it will shine him. The original mission aside, he joined the League against Nedzu and Aizawa's direct orders. They have every reason to castigate him for that alone, to shift any and all blame off their own shoulders. But then—

You're not in trouble.

So *what*, then?

The question plagues him late into the evening, when the sun begins its downward slant and the overhead lights grow harsh, slicing thin needles of pressure into his eyes. He's begun to seriously consider crawling to the light switch on the far wall when a nurse finally comes in, but the rescue is short-lived.

She plants him in the wheelchair and glides him down an empty hall, where the lights are somehow even worse. He squints through the various twists and turns, until they arrive at a small waiting room. Shell-padded chairs line the walls, painted with splashes of calming lavenders and blues - cartoonish and flowery images lining the baseboards. An adjoining door bears a plaque: *X-Ray Imaging*.

"The technician's on his way," the nurse explains. "Would you like me to wait with you?"

Hitoshi waves her off, and she doesn't protest. Alone, he drops the mask, slumping back in the wheelchair. The room is cold, the draft of a nearby vent ruffles his gown and whispers along his spine. He picks at the bandaid on the back of his wrist, where the IV needle had sat, and wonders if they'll even bother putting it back in tonight. *God*, he hopes so. The weaning dosage has done less and less to keep the nightmares at bay, but he can only imagine how much worse they'll be without it.

His stomach tightens at the thought, and he roves the room, eager for a distraction. There's a low table to his right - child-height with rounded edges, and littered with broken crayons and crumpled construction paper. A single sheet has fallen beneath the table, scrawled with a child's approximation of a butterfly. He bends to retrieve it, then straightens quickly at the sound of an opening door.

It isn't the technician. Instead, he meets the gaze of a small, pale figure, frozen in the doorway with startled eyes wide in her face.

Eri.

Adrenaline surges through him. He scrambles back, but there's nowhere to go - the wheels of the chair are locked beneath him. He lifts his knees. Lowers them. Stares.

Eri hardly seems to notice. She steps into the room, the door drifting shut behind her. Her gaze darts shyly to the table, back to him. The paper in his hand.

Wordlessly, Hitoshi extends it.

To his amazement, she creeps forward. A tiny hand snakes out to accept the offering. Her wrists are littered in thin, pink scars, knuckles dotted with colourful band aids. She takes the paper from his hand and examines it carefully before turning that same steady gaze over him.

“You’re hurt.”

The words are a static shock, jolting him back to reality. The bubble of panic around his thoughts pops and leaves his ears ringing. He blinks down at himself. Comparatively, she’s right. Sock-footed and paper-gowned, gauze like a collar around his neck and face the colour of rotten fruit.

He has no whiteboard, and no choice but to summon his voice.

“Yeah,” he croaks, and clears his throat to try again. “Yeah, but that’s okay. There’s... lots of nice people here to help.”

It’s hardly his best work, but she appears to give it serious thought nonetheless. “I got butterflies,” she says at last, and displays her knuckles.

Hitoshi’s throat bobs. He stares at the bandaids and wills the image still. His eyes feel wet. “Oh. That’s... really cool.”

“You should ask for butterflies,” she tells him solemnly. “Instead of the white ones.”

“I should,” he agrees, and raises a fluttering hand to his neck.

She eyes the motion, then glances back to the picture in her hands. She steps forward, and places it in his lap, feather light.

“Oh,” he says, voice rough, hardly a whisper. He shakes his head. “No, that’s okay, don’t–”

She leans forward—he thinks, for one delirious moment, to hug him—but only cranes her neck over his shoulder, focus stolen by the crayons. She’s gone between one second and the next, and it’s so unguarded, so childlike, so *normal*, Hitoshi can do nothing but blink furiously, willing his composure to hold.

It’s like this that the technician arrives, minutes later, to fall slack-jawed at the sight of Hitoshi, motionless in his chair, and Eri, legs folded on the floor beside him, crayons in hand and paper spread over her knee. Apologies pour out of his mouth as he pages for a nurse,

who arrives in a flurry to usher Eri back to the pediatrics wing.

Hitoshi drifts through it, still numb from shock, his fingers tight around the corner of the paper, but reality comes crashing down swiftly as soon as the x-rays are done.

They've decided it's time to remove the trach.

That night is undoubtedly his worst.

Every breath is terrifying without the trach. He inhales purposefully, mechanically, afraid his body will forget to if he lets his mind wander from the task. The doctors appear unconcerned, and Hitoshi can't spare the breath to explain the fear - just lies in his bed and breathes in slow, measured counts, until the sky exhausts itself to darkness and drags his mind from its hypervigilance.

He dreams senseless, horrid things. The train ride to UA, only his arms are cuffed to the overhead bars. The furious rattle of the tracks sounds like approaching footsteps, and he's certain at any moment the other students are going to turn to reveal cracked lips and red eyes. He arrives at UA and the class is a hospital room, his desk a sterile white cot. Hagakure sits in the chair beside it. There's a trach in her throat and he can see it through her skin, bobbing up and down, suspended in air.

He wakes to suffocation, the cold certainty he's dying. His limbs are locked in place, tears stifled with short, panicked breaths. He can't even summon a scream, can do nothing but weather the storm until it drags him back under, and under, and under.

The morning seeps in some time later, foggy and gray. The world is jagged-edged and warped, like sea glass that hasn't had enough time to smooth, grainy and discoloured and still sharp enough to hurt. He remembers to breathe, barely.

The nurse brings him his final test. Solid foods - bland rice and broiled chicken. His stomach is tight and hot, his throat worse, but mom's there, waiting expectantly, so he slides on the mask and downs the food and miraculously, doesn't die. He breathes and breathes and breathes, a puppet on a string.

They change the dressings on his feet for the final time. The scabs have sealed over, raised white ridges of scar tissue. He rolls his weight around, testing the feel of them, the hurt.

He limps to the bathroom, hangs his head over the toilet and desperately wills the meal to stay down. Mom's brought clothes from home - jeans and a sweatshirt, a high-collared coat he can't bring himself to zip up too high, and shoes he doesn't recognize. His old runners, he remembers, were one of the many casualties of his defection, lost to the ashes of the barn where he met Kurogiri.

He stares at Eri's butterfly, folds it into careful thirds and tucks it into the coat pocket. He reminds himself that this is real.

Back in his room, the nurses have already stripped the bed. A doctor rattles off a final checklist - hands him antibiotics and painkillers in colour-coded bottles, sedatives that come with a whole spreadsheet of instructions. He eyes them with skepticism, then more pointedly the column of potential side effects. The words *sleep paralysis* grin back.

The discharge papers are signed in a blur, and mom leads him into the hall. The lights are harsher than they were in his room, buzzing angrily behind the glass. His new shoes squeak on the linoleum as they pass unfamiliar doors, swells of hidden voices and distant sounds that don't quite permeate the quiet. A private hall, a private elevator, a private exit. *Outside* - cold air, cloudy sky, snow half-melted and gray. His head spins to take it all in.

They're in a small parking lot, Mom's car one of just three. And beside it, a figure.

Aizawa.

Hitoshi doesn't ask, just ducks his head and follows mom's lead, watches her hands flutter around as if afraid to touch as she helps him into the back seat, and bites his tongue when Aizawa slides in beside him.

No words are exchanged. Mom takes the wheel, her gaze hard in the rearview, reading cues in a script Hitoshi hasn't studied. They've talked, then. They've planned this. All of this, without him. His stomach swoops.

Mom starts the car, and Saitama General tilts through the window and out of sight.

Shouta's night with Hagakure's file is unenlightening, to say the least. The folder itself is no longer than three pages, yet the words somehow still managed to blur by the end. Though that may have been the scotch's fault, more than anything.

Not that he needed much hard-hitting analysis. Tsukauchi was right - there's fuck all to work with, other than the bare bones of a biography and her equally unremarkable student records.

The morning, at least, comes with a bit more excitement - an update from Tsukauchi on the house in Iwate. The home of Hagakure's alleged uncle, a man known publicly as Okuta Kagero.

A team of Iwate's local Pros arrived in the early hours of dawn, and left hours later with nothing but fingerprint dust and a fridge full of stale leftovers. Another hideout abandoned, another missed opportunity.

"Geez, don't look so damn disappointed, Eraser," Tsukauchi tells him over a video call. "You think things would have gone well if the entire League of Villains had been camping out inside? Not everyone wants the fame of going hand-to-hand with Shigaraki Tomura."

Shouta rolls his eyes, tongue ready with a quip about being an underground hero who specifically goes out of his way to *avoid* fame, but actually, all recent developments considered, he's probably never wanted to fight Shigaraki *more*. "We got neighbours we can question?"

"Oh, sure," Tsukauchi says breezily. "He was a real man about town."

Shouta flips him off.

Tsukauchi clicks his tongue. "Closest neighbours are half a mile away. Country folk have it too good, I'm telling you," he sighs. "They thought he was an art dealer, apparently. Rich, reclusive. Didn't even know he had a niece."

"He didn't," Shouta reminds him. Not really. No blood relation, no traceable history. *Finances*, Hitoshi had told them of the man he'd known as Giran. *Recruitment*. How the hell he found Hagakure, let alone turned her to his cause, they still have no idea.

“If Shinsou’s right, Giran wasn’t just a financier for the League. He was involved with my guys too.” *My guys* being the Eight Precepts - an investigation which Tsukauchi is apparently now at the helm of. They’ve got the upper echelons in custody, but none of them are talking yet. Either Chisaki Kai put the fear of god into them, or their loyalties run deeper than anyone yet knows.

“Keep me updated,” Shouta tells him. “If you find anything–”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ll be the first to know,” Tsukauchi says. “How about you? Any news on the homefront? Kid’s being discharged today, isn’t he?”

Haru’s landlord has agreed to on-site security personnel in the apartment lobby, and Nedzu’s negotiated with Origin Hero Agency to set up 24-hour clandestine Pro surveillance from a building across the street. Anything more obvious and they run the risk of attracting attention, and the last thing Hitoshi needs right now is more curious stares turned his way.

Privately, Shouta memorizes the building’s emergency exits, and the blind spots from the neighbouring highrises. It does little in the way of soothing his worries, but he bites his tongue on suggesting Haru change the locks and give him a key. The public doesn’t even know Hitoshi’s been caught, let alone that he’s been set free to sleep in his own bed. He’ll have plenty of space and privacy, and Haru– well. Haru would probably love nothing more than to never glimpse Shouta’s face again.

Or so he’d thought, before she called last night, voice hard, to summon him to Saitama for Hitoshi’s discharge.

Shouta doesn’t push his luck, falls gratefully and without question into the role of security entourage. It’s evening by the time mother and son meet him in the parking lot.

He isn’t sure what to expect, but it’s far from the sight that greets him. The doors open and Haru steps though first. She finds his gaze, eyes hard in her face, a silent warning. *Brace yourself.*

Hitoshi trails behind her, gait stiff, not quite a limp. He tilts his head back just slightly as the breeze stirs his air, then straightens, eyes falling to Shouta.

It’s not the waxy complexion or the armful of medication or even the bulge of bandages at the throat of his unzipped coat that chill him. It’s

Hitoshi's *face*.

Hitoshi's expression, behind the bruises, is unflinching stone, eyes like twin pools of dark water, giving away nothing beneath. Not vacant, Shouta can tell, like he was under the haze of sedatives. He's present, alert, but placid, small, a sight unseen, a question that doesn't want asking. If he's surprised at Shouta's presence, hell, if he feels *anything* at all, it's invisible. Hidden behind a perfect construction of calm.

Shouta's heart stutters at the sight, an electric instinct, a deep-seated *wrong*. But there's no villain to fight, no quirk to erase, no threat at all but the impossible indifference presented before him. Hitoshi folds himself into the car without a word, and Shouta has no choice but to follow cue.

A quiet dusk falls over their drive.

Shouta's fingers twitch in his lap. Heat rattles through the vents and fogs the windows, but Haru doesn't seem to notice. The traffic lights flicker, bathing them in splashes of neon red and green, the shadows the only change on Hitoshi's otherwise unmoving face. Shouta casts him sidelong glances in the silence, finds him dead-eyed and clutching his prescription painkillers as if for dear life. A fine sheen of sweat has broken out across his skin.

Movement draws him back to the windshield. Haru slows on a turn as a dark figure makes a reckless dash across the crosswalk. Others gather in clusters on the sidewalk, waiting for the signal to turn. Hitoshi slinks lower in his seat.

Shouta's phone buzzes with a text. He spares it a glance. Tsukauchi. *Call me*. His shoulders tense against the stifling silence of the car. He texts back, *Busy. What?*

Haru's phone buzzes too, the vibrations faint from somewhere in the folds of her purse. The car's console lights up, bluetooth chiming helpfully. An unknown number. She hits a button to silence it. A moment later, it rings again.

Dread settles like a hand around his shoulders. "Haru, stop the car."

She does, but not because of his warning. The road ahead is dark with movement, sidewalks swarming and the rightmost lane cluttered with hastily parked cars. Haru's apartment building sits beyond, lit up in the spotlight glow of a dozen bulky news cameras.

A sharp breath spears the silence. Hitoshi goes rigid beside him.

Abruptly, he begins to struggle—for a horrible moment, Shouta thinks, in the throes of panic—before he wrenches free of the seatbelt and dives for the floor. He wedges himself into the foot space and Shouta slaps a steady hand on his shoulder just as Haru throws the car into reverse.

The car behind them lays on its horn, and Haru swerves up over the curb to let it pass. Pedestrians clamour at the windows. Cameras swivel their way.

“Haru, go,” Shouta says, but she’s already on it, wheels spinning as they lurch into a turn.

Headlights come on in the rearview, the boldest of the news vans giving chase. Haru swears and sails through a red light.

Shouta’s phone buzzes from where it’s fallen beneath the car seat, a warning come too late. His hand, he realizes, is still clawed around Hitoshi’s shoulder, who’s gone frozen beneath the touch. He retracts it apologetically, cranes his neck and urges the darkness to swallow the street behind them. That won’t be the last of them, or the worst, and whatever dreams he had for Hitoshi’s quiet, uninterrupted recovery are whisked out the window.

The media storm has broken open. If Hitoshi was in the eye of it before, now, he’s about to be hit full force.

Chapter End Notes

Kid can't catch a break huh

Thank you for everyone's lovely comments on the last chapter and to the many new readers who've stopped by to share their thoughts as well! I know I've been away a while and I apologize for that, but you guys continuously keep me inspired with your kind words and encouragement.

Next chapter will be very soon because it is already written and I am hggggnnr v excited for it !!!

Testing the Waters

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's twenty minutes of traffic violations before they shake their tail, and another ten of sitting in an empty parking lot with the lights off and the chill creeping in before Shouta deems it safe to take to the streets again.

Haru's hands stutter as she turns the key. Shouta offers to take over driving, and it's a testament to how shaken she must be that she doesn't immediately tell him to fuck off.

Hitoshi is another story. Shouta expected embarrassment, anxiety. Hell, full blown panic. Any number of reactions would make sense, given what he's been through. But the minute the prying eyes are gone, the kid pulls himself free of the car's foot space as though shaking the dust from an old coat and folds back into his seat without a word of reassurance needed.

Every nerve in Shouta's body pulls to the surface of his skin, like a magnet, drawing his gaze back to Hitoshi over and over as they wait. It screams to pay attention, to *watch*, to find the break in character, the split second of movement beneath the statue's veneer. But if there's any fight for composure happening within him, it's a fight that goes unseen.

Haru meets his eye in the rearview. Flickers to Hitoshi, back to him.

"Should we... try to find a hotel?"

Shouta gives it a solid five seconds of consideration. The risk of an unfamiliar location, the likelihood of finding a vacancy at this hour, the speed with which an underpaid desk clerk would sell them out to the tabloids.

He grits his teeth. "I might have another suggestion."

They make it all the way to the door of Shouta's apartment before his consciousness catches up to him, and he worries, for a moment, whether this is crossing some sort of teacher-student boundary. He unlocks the door and shoulders it open, kicking the thought aside. Honestly. They're so far past that point it's not even funny.

His apartment is spacious, but sparse. A neatness that speaks not towards a tendency to clean, but rather a lack of time spent getting things dirty. He hurries into the living room and sweeps Hagakure's file—still open on the coffee table—under a pile of 1-A's botched Provisional License Exam reports. Another casualty of the disaster that has been this semester. They'll have to reschedule those for next term. He shakes his head, casting out the concern. Later. Some problems can wait until later.

Haru seems to have regained some of her vigor in the drive over, shock bailing out in abdication to anger. She throws her purse on the table like she's done it a thousand times, and storms into the apartment to take stock, Hitoshi trailing mutely on her heels.

Shouta gives them a moment to settle. There's a matching wire of anger woven through his limbs, but nowhere to aim it. He shakes out his arms, forcibly unfurls his fists. He punches Hitoshi's name into the search bar on his phone, and does a cursory glance at the headlines. His breath rattles through him, wire tightening.

"Who the fuck leaked it?" he demands of Tsukauchi, the second the line connects.

He storms into the bedroom, but keeps the door open after some debate - a sense of moral obligation demanding the transparency. Who gives a shit if they can hear him? He has nothing to hide.

"We don't know." Tsukauchi has the decency to sound equally pissed, at least. "*QuirkBlog* was the first to drop it, of all the embarrassments. They're saying it was another tip from their so-called *inside source* at the PD."

Plug your fucking leak, Shouta wants to shout, but bites it back. He's the last person to talk.

"He still in the hospital?" Tsukauchi asks.

"Just got out."

"You with him?"

"Mhm, and his mom."

"Good. We need to talk damage control. She'll want to be a part of that," Tsukauchi says. "Nedzu wants to get the lay of the land first - see what they're saying tomorrow, if the story snowballs or if anything else comes to light. We'll put out a statement tomorrow evening or the next. We can get our story straight in the morning. Just get him somewhere safe for now."

"Working on it," he grumbles, and kicks a crumpled pair of pants into the closet.

"And Aizawa? Watch yourself. People get crazy ideas when they hear a famous criminal's walking free."

"He's not a criminal."

Tsukauchi gives a strangled sigh. " *Celebrity*, then."

Shouta hangs up, but he's in no rush to return to the fray just yet. Hitoshi deserves him better than this. Calmer, collected.

He tears the sheets from the bed and remakes it with fresh ones. Wipes down the counters in the ensuite. Digs a plug-in air freshener out of the back of his closet and crams it into the outlet.

He straightens, rolls onto the balls of his feet, testing his weight. Frustration aches in his chest, but he pushes it down, folds it into a shape small enough to slot between his ribs.

Back outside, Haru looks to be working through her own anger much the same. She rifles through his pantry like she's on a crusade, her face etched in a scowl.

"You got a blender?" she snaps.

Sensing, for once, that this fury might not currently be aimed his way, Shouta juts his chin in the direction of the cabinets. "Bottom left."

He makes his way to the living room. Hitoshi comes into view from behind, and Shouta's ready for the sight of him now - the tense line of his spine, sitting on the futon as though he's trying to touch as little of it as physically possible.

He swings wide, so the kid has plenty of time to see him coming. Hitoshi snaps to him with startled eyes, then quickly replaces the

expression with that same smooth marble. Shouta sees it this time, the exact moment it settles over him - the smallest twitch, and then. Nothing. Shouta looks, and he could see anything, could imagine whatever he wanted. Hitoshi's a mirror, pouring his own expectations back at him. It must have saved his ass a thousand times, with the League. *Give me a chance*, he could be saying. *Trust me*. Trade your freedom for mine.

There's just the one futon - nowhere else to plant himself but the floor, which he does. He throws himself at Hitoshi's feet, and doesn't say anything for a long moment.

Hitoshi doesn't seem to know what to do with this. His posture retreats by a fraction, then leans forward, testing to see if this is what Shouta wants.

God. Shouta aches to reach between the veil of his eyes, like he could pluck the thoughts from his head. He can't bear for them to go on like this, with so much unspoken between them.

"I want you to know that I'm on your side," he says quietly. "No matter what comes to light, or what they say about you. I can't speak for Nedzu or Tsukauchi or anyone else, but Hitoshi, *I am on your side*."

Hitoshi's brows pull together. Shouta waits, lets those clever skitter across his face, and *pleads* that they believe him.

His throat works, bandages bobbing. "Thank you," he says evenly.

His heart plummets. "Hitoshi," he says, and can't form his mouth around the rest. *Stop it*, and, *You don't have to do that*. Every word a performance, a barrier. *It's okay. Please, let me show you that it's okay*. In the end, he can only repeat himself. "I'm on your side."

The kitchen is suspiciously quiet, the whirl of the blender nonexistent. Hitoshi must realize it too. Shouta grimaces. This is neither the time nor the place. He needs to rest, to *sleep*, if not in his own bed than at least somewhere more comfortable than a hospital cot. And Shouta needs time to get his head straight. "Listen. We don't have to talk about it right now. I just-- wanted you to know. Whatever you want, whatever you need - I'll do it. Okay?"

It's a premature end to an already clumsy conversation, but Shouta can't bring himself to force anything more out of him, not with every word pained and coated in doubt. God. Hitoshi shouldn't even be

talking so soon, with his throat as it is. He drags a hand through his hair, reminds himself: later. Some things can wait until later.

He stands, knees creaking in protest. The anger has wiped him clear, drained away to a glacial calm. He moves mechanically - locks the door, pulls the curtains shut. It's not the comfort of home, but it's something. Safety, at least. They'll deal with the rest of it later.

He hangs fresh towels in the bathroom. Puts on a load of long-neglected laundry. Straightens the shoes by the door. What else?

Haru has emerged from the kitchen at last. She's scrounged a smoothie from god-knows-what, which Hitoshi sips at delicately. Haru watches him and doesn't even try to look like she isn't, fingers pressed to her lips and worrying at the skin.

Food, Shouta thinks belatedly. He'll have to get more food - there's fuck all for breakfast. Not to mention clothes.

"Do you need anything from your place?" he asks, voice low. "I can send someone from the station."

"I'll make a list." Haru nods distractedly, eyes still on her son, before she seems to realize their proximity. She turns to Shouta, gaze suddenly sharp.

The hairs on the back of his neck jump to attention with the abrupt realization that she's using her quirk on him. He raises an eyebrow but doesn't fight it - whatever she's prying for, she can have it.

Thank you, she mouths.

He makes a cheap boxed soba for himself and Haru, and eats between answering texts. Nedzu has apparently pulled a few strings to get the press pushed off Hitoshi's street, then pulled a few more to get them pushed off the entire block. Shouta wonders at the likelihood of getting them deported from the country, but doesn't push his luck.

Tsukauchi sends one of his guys on the aforementioned errand run to pick up the necessities from Haru's place. Shouta meets him downstairs, and by the time he makes it back, the windows are dark

behind their curtains, the living bathed in the hazy glow of a single reading lamp.

They dance around actually saying it, but Shouta's room is plenty big enough to fit mom and son in comfort - which he happily forfeits despite the perfunctory protests. He passes Haru her requested things, turns and plants himself on the futon in a way that leaves little room for discussion, and studies the ceiling until the bedroom door finally closes and sounds of movement settle into silence behind it.

He blows out a long breath and rises, the pretense of sleep abandoned.

He does the dishes, paces, pours himself a scotch. He settles back on the futon and watches the windows while midnight crawls by. He glances over the evening's headlines - sees Hitoshi's name smeared like blood across the screen.

There's talk of defection, of vigilantism, of arrest. They have the general timeline right, if not the details, and they know he was admitted to Saitama with serious injuries, but don't seem to know the extent of them. Shouta goes over the names of the medical staff that were assigned to Hitoshi's care. Haru had vouched for them personally, but even the best doctors are underpaid, and it's certainly not beneath some of the seedier media outlets to offer bribes.

He spares a moment to wonder about his own colleagues. He's already got a variety of incredulous texts from Kayama and Hazashi demanding to know if his ill-timed leave has anything to do with the news about Hitoshi. Nothing from Toshinori, self-righteous reprimands or otherwise, but that doesn't surprise him. He's been busier than usual this week, anyway - watching over 1-A in Shouta's absence.

God, the *students*. Just the thought has him reaching for a refill on the scotch. He shoots it back in one hard swallow, closes his eyes against the burn and presses the glass to his forehead.

The students don't even know the half of it yet. Hitoshi's one thing, but Hagakure's a whole other beast. He tries to imagine breaking the news. *Alright, class, listen up. Today's lesson is on betrayal and deceit and the fact that you can never trust anyone, not even your closest friends.*

He lowers the glass, and his fingers find the edges of her file without thought. He scowls, rips it from the stack and spreads it across the table.

Her student ID stares back, faceless - the rigid collar of her uniform, the white-walled backdrop.

Born July 16, in Akita Prefecture. Attended a string of different elementary schools before being granted an abrupt custody transfer at the tender age of fourteen. She moved to Iwate with her alleged uncle— the man they now know to be Giran—and disappeared off the veritable map. Homeschooled for a year and half before she appeared as if from thin air in Musutafu, and slipped through the entrance exam by a hair's breadth to be admitted to UA's Hero Course.

He flips the page. No known allergies. Only one emergency contact. Invisibility Quirk, developed early. She was three years old when the world stopped being able to see her. Hagakure wasn't a part of a single after-school club. She was a smart kid, but never enough to stand out - B's across the board.

He takes it again from the top, as though he might have missed something. The lack of detail is stark, now that he has it laid out in front of him, but of course it never would have caught his eye before.

He finds her parents on the third page. A single line. Two names. Hagakure Genki and Hagakure Asano, who now goes by her maiden name, Fukumen Asano.

He's had his suspicions since the interrogation in Nedzu's office. *My birth parents have no legal say in my actions.* That doesn't happen without a reason.

Shouta picks up his phone, searches: *Hagakure Genki, Akita Prefecture.*

He's met with a variety of colourful results. An ad for a local festival, a small town brewery that was apparently named after the man—and shortly thereafter stripped of that name—and an old, outdated Pro Hero profile. *Hagakure Genki: the Force Hero!*

The floor creaks.

Shouta's quirk explodes to life as he snaps to the sound.

Hitoshi stands in the middle of the hall, one foot hovering as though frozen mid-step. A loose T-shirt, tousled hair. Bathed in shadow, the yellowed bruises beneath his eyes are a deep, ugly brown.

Shouta releases his quirk and closes the folder in one smooth motion, sliding it to the edge of the table. He gives a silent nod in greeting,

reluctant to open his mouth and break whatever spell is holding him there.

Hitoshi wavers, both feet coming to ground and weight shifting between them. He creeps to the edge of the light, arms folded awkwardly - not quite wringing his hands, but a close thing. He's embarrassed. "Sorry," he whispers.

"It's fine," Shouta says quickly. "You okay?"

Hitoshi's eyes the wall, the floor. He mumbles something Shouta can't parse.

"Can't sleep?" he guesses.

Hitoshi nods. "Throat hurts."

Concern lances through him. He's been talking too much. Shouta casts about for something to write on, grabs a pen and the nearest page from 1-A's stack of exams—*sorry, Ashido*—and thrusts it out in offering.

There's the faintest tug at the corner of Hitoshi's mouth. He approaches at last, lowers himself beside Shouta and flattens the paper over his knee.

"The meds don't help?" Shouta asks.

Hitoshi shakes his head. Writes, *Didn't take them*.

"Can I ask why?"

A shrug. Then, *Dreams*.

Shouta can't fault him for that. The nightmares must be horrid. A distraction, then. "You want something to drink?"

Hitoshi's eyes flit to the empty scotch, and linger a split second longer than Shouta would like. It's a possibility he's considered but hadn't previously had the capacity to worry about - that Hitoshi probably partook in his fair share of illicit substances while in the company of the League. He knows about the smoking, obviously, but as with so many other things, doesn't know the extent of it, or what other factors may have been introduced behind closed doors.

Shouta adds it to his ever-growing list. *Later*.

He heads to the kitchen and sets a kettle to boil, emerges a few

minutes later with lukewarm chamomile tea and a bottle of aspirin. Not exactly prescription-grade painkillers, but it's a place to start.

Hitoshi appears not to have moved an inch, but as Shouta lowers the tea to the table, he notices that Hagakure's file has. He doesn't comment, just carefully sets down his offerings and waits it out.

Hitoshi manages a few sips without issue, and only gives a small wince as the aspirin goes down. That done, Shouta picks up the folder and spreads it open once more.

"You're right," he says, without accusation. "You know more than I do, anyway. You should take a look."

Hitoshi doesn't go rigid with guilt - he's far too good for that, after everything. He only glances at the file, then up at Shouta, a wire of tension in his jaw - the obvious question: is this a test?

It dawns on him suddenly. *He's* the one being tested. The hesitant approach, the admission of pain, of nightmares. The way Hitoshi's gone soft and vulnerable and deceptively easy to read - exactly what he thinks Shouta wants from him.

Then the slip-up, the betrayal of trust, flipping through Hagakure's file while Shouta's back was turned. Even this was too obvious, too simple. What will you do, Hitoshi's asking, now that you know you can't trust me?

Shouta lowers the file to the table, gives himself a moment to compose his thoughts. He has the distinct impression of wavering over the precipice of something vast and dangerous, dark waters below. "I meant what I said earlier. I'm on your side. No matter what."

"You don't owe me that," Hitoshi says slowly, each word rough, excavated with care. "I joined the League after you ended the mission."

These are the first *real* words Hitoshi has spoken to him since this whole goddamn clusterfuck began. Shouta gives them the consideration they are due. "You were put in an impossible situation, by people who held power over you. You were isolated, and upset, and you made a reckless decision because of it." There's nothing to forgive, no need for the excuse. Still, for Hitoshi's sake, he voices it. "And in doing so, you saved All Might's life."

"I could have left. I made the decision to stay."

As if it was ever that simple. “No one holds that against you.”

“The time in the bank—”

“I’m the one who let it get that far,” Shouta says. “I’m the one who let you go.”

Hitoshi’s lips press into a tight line, as if disputing the point. “I made you do it.”

“I *let* you do it. Hitoshi—”

“Stop,” he hisses, and there, finally - the chip in the ice, the flicker of anger and the stubborn, reckless kid he’s come to know beneath. “I joined the League. *I* did it. I— I *wanted* to. You don’t--” His fingers claw around the words, as though to force them into shape. “You don’t owe me anything.”

I wanted to . There’s honesty, in there - a bleeding wound, festering, promising infection. Shouta’s throat goes tight at the sound, not with shock, but with understanding. Just how badly did he fail this kid?

"I'm not going to turn my back on you because of a mistake," Shouta says. "I'm going to help you, if you'll let me, and not because of the mission or because of what I owe you, but because it's right. Because *I* want to."

Hitoshi's gaze pinballs across him, searching for the lie. There's a desperation there, a hunger, like he *wants* to believe him, but doesn't know how. They're still on the edge of that precipice, that plummet. Hitoshi is testing the waters below, and these next few moments are going to define the depth of it.

Shouta picks up the folder, holds it out in offering once more. “I trust you.”

Hitoshi accepts it gingerly, fingers the curled edges of the paper, where Shouta has before. He scans the first two pages without expression, but pauses on the third, tracing a fingertip over the characters of her parents’ names, as though to memorize the shape.

“Anything we should add?” Shouta prompts.

Hitoshi lowers the folder. Writes again. *Her dad was a low-level Pro.* The pen hovers, then, *He used to hurt her. Her mom knew about it.*

Shouta reads it once, then again, giving himself time to form a reaction. He blows out a long breath, and shapes the words as neutrally as possible. “She must have had a very difficult upbringing. I can see how that may have influenced her decision to join the League.”

Immediately, he knows he missed the mark. Hitoshi voices no challenge, but his expression is vacant again - mind caught in a split-second shift, an internal recalibration. Shouta backpedals. “Were you close with her?”

Hitoshi shrugs. Writes, *I didn't know her for long.*

Since winter break, he remembers. “But were you close with her?” he asks again.

Hitoshi hovers over the page, starts and stops and starts again. His shoulders hitch, frustration bleeding out in a sigh. At last, he croaks, “She isn’t who you think. None of them are.”

Some kind of Stockholm Syndrome? The thought flashes to mind before he can fight it back. Hitoshi was isolated and hurt - easy to manipulate, to radicalize. They nurtured his power, appealed to his ego. They promised him the world. That kind of loyalty doesn’t go away overnight. Even cruelty, even violence, can be addictive when delivered by the right hand.

He feels a profound surge of affection for this vulnerable, damaged part of Hitoshi. This boy, who somehow, after everything, still sees himself in the people who hurt him.

There isn’t a single one of them Shouta wouldn’t flay alive if given the chance. They deserve nothing less, after what they’ve done. But Hitoshi doesn’t need Shouta’s anger, or his righteousness, or his shoddy psychoanalysis. He needs to be listened to, be heard, in whatever way he’s able.

“Okay,” Shouta says, and hands him another blank page. “Then tell me who they are.”

Chapter End Notes

I know lots of people have been very eager to see Aizawa and Shinsou finally *talk* - hopefully the wait was worth it! This chapter and particularly the last scene was tons of fun to write. Hitoshi's in such an interesting headspace right now and getting

to look at him from Shouta's perspective is *chef's kiss*

Next chapter will be a bit shorter but bring us back to Shinsou's POV. See ya then!

The Pariah

Chapter Notes

Closing out the year with a bit of a shorter chapter. Was a hard one to write but I'm satisfied. Enjoy, and see y'all soon!

TW: reference to a non-consensual kiss in the first few paragraphs

Hitoshi comes awake with a strangled gasp.

He unfurls with a jolt, tangled beneath a blanket he doesn't remember getting under, and instinct has him kicking against the unfamiliar weight. His foot connects with the coffee table - the remnants of last night's tea rattling in its saucer. He has just enough presence of mind to dive after it, narrowly saving its half-finished contents from spewing across the table.

He steadies it with trembling hands, throat tight and dry, mouth bitter with fear. A dream dances at the edge of his mind - the glint of a knife, Toga's sigh, the tang of copper and salt as her lips pressed against his, a wordless apology. He touches his fingers to his mouth, pulls away nearly expecting to find them bloodied.

Sound draws him from the memory. Aizawa stomps into the kitchen doorway, loudly announcing his presence without moving any closer. "You okay?"

Last night floods back - the contents of their conversation scrawled on pages that still litter the table. He doesn't remember falling asleep.

"Hitoshi?" Aizawa asks.

His breath rattles in - the air all the louder for the way his throat strangles against it. He coughs. "Sorry."

"Nothing to apologize for."

"No, I mean." He swallows, clears his throat. "For stealing your futon."

Aizawa's answering smile looks fond, and Hitoshi struggles to find anything behind his eyes to dispute it. "Ah, well. That's what the sleeping bag's for."

With that, he retreats around the corner and out of sight, and Hitoshi's too thankful for the reprieve to be embarrassed by the obvious intent with which it was given. He eyes the doorway, beyond which there's the clatter of dishes, the sputter of a coffee-machine, and the silence much too long to be anything but entirely purposeful. Aizawa listening and Hitoshi watching and both of them waiting for the other to make the first move, to guide whatever little dance it is they're doing here.

I'm on your side.

It was a risk, coming out to talk to Aizawa last night. Although in some ways it got him exactly what he was hoping for, in others, it's left him just as lost.

I'm on your side.

It's the perfect lie, too good to be true. The obvious guilt mixed with reckless affection, the show of trust, the willingness to hear him out about the League and the blatant declaration of loyalty despite it.

I'm on your side.

He replays the words clinically, as if to wring the deception out, mind buzzing and body on high alert, watching for some unseen threat. He can't help but sense it's all part of an elaborate ruse, like Aizawa's trying to *get* something out of him - convince him of something, or have him admit to something he can't take back. Again and again, Hitoshi replays their conversation, examining every pause and word and flicker of expression that had moved across Aizawa's shadowed face - why did you say that, and why then, and what do you *want* in return?

Paranoia churns and brews through him like the coffee Aizawa's still pretending to make - the rhythmic drag of the spoon against the ceramic impossibly grating in the way that only dangerously frayed nerves could make it.

The bedroom door opens, and mom emerges with hair damp and clinging to her shoulders, smelling of mint and soap. She smiles at the sight of him, and plants a kiss on his forehead before he can even panic at the realization that he never went back to the room last night. He wonders if she'll mention it, but she's there and gone before the instinct to think up an excuse sets its claws in. Aizawa meets her in the kitchen doorway and wordlessly passes her a mug, like they've done this a hundred times before. Mom smiles at *him* too.

Hitoshi stares after them, feeling suspiciously domestic. Terror looms quickly behind it.

He flies to the bedroom, and struggles not to slam the door behind him. The bed has been made and his things are laid out on top of it - mom's handiwork. He stares at them, feeling stupid, like he missed something tremendously obvious, then quickly gropes about for a distraction. He should shower - he smells like stale sweat and hospital detergent. What kind of shampoo does Aizawa use, anyway? Will he be mad if Hitoshi uses it? Wait. Did *mom* use it? He doesn't know, and suddenly has no desire to find out.

There's a balcony door on the far wall. He crosses to it with quick steps, and throws it open to a blast of winter air. The concrete is damp with morning frost, but he stands on it anyway, the wind cutting knives through his flimsy sleep shirt. The dry air burns in his throat, but he sucks it down hungrily, and feels the noise in his head begin to quiet.

There's a courtyard, a dozen or so stories below. Empty flowerbeds and wilted trees dot a small garden, a flagstone walkway weaving between them. He tries to picture them in the spring, lush and green, muffling the sounds of the city beyond.

There are only a few figures down there this early, braving the cold. He wonders what would happen if they glanced up. Could they see him from that far? Would they recognize him? It's a strange thought, but it won't be for long. He'll have to be careful. Probably for the rest of his life. He's a celebrity now, after all.

He shuts his eyes, willing back a dizzying rush of dread.

It's about to get ugly - no matter what platitudes mom or Aizawa try to soften it with, no matter who he has in his corner or how good of a job they do at damage control. The media's going to eat him alive.

It will be people like Nedzu who have the power, in the coming days. Whatever hope there is of shaping Hitoshi's re-entrance into public image, it lies in the hands of those far more powerful than him, and with far less to lose.

He doesn't doubt for a second that Nedzu is still scheming, conjuring some convoluted plan, some greater-than-thou ends to all his morally-ambiguous means. Hitoshi doesn't *think* Nedzu would throw him under the bus to save his own ass, but only because it couldn't possibly work. There's no telling the fury mom would unleash, and

mutually assured destruction likely doesn't interest someone as clever as Nedzu.

There's also the League to consider. Once the dust settles and they find their footing, Giran will want to release their own version of the story, if only to muddy the water and cast doubt on UA. If Nedzu lies, he runs the risk of incriminating himself, digging his grave even deeper. As much as it's going to hurt, the truth—or something close to it—is probably everyone's safest bet.

He can picture it now - the most flattering version of the story, the one that implicates UA's recklessness without spelling its doom, paints them as cornered, desperate heroes fighting back against an invasive, invisible evil.

They'll say that they knew there was a traitor, and that they hired Hitoshi to weed them out. They'll say that the plan worked too well, that he was kidnapped by the League, but that all his schooling and training and strong moral compass proved crucial, that he was able to feed UA information while playing his part as delinquent-turned-villain to perfection. They'll say that in a critical moment he was at last discovered, leading to a daring play by the heroes - an exchange, the UA traitor set free to guarantee Hitoshi's own safe release. A sensational story, captivating hearts and thrilling fans everywhere, and true enough to hold up to inspection. But entirely predicated on exposing Hagakure.

She'll be the scapegoat - the cause for every threat and danger and minor misfortune UA's ever encountered. The world will sink their teeth into her, will lavish her blood and shame, will call her vile and cruel and irredeemable. They'll label her *traitor*, just like they did to Hitoshi. They'll vilify her, exile her, crucify her.

And the League will offer her their comfort, their safety, with no escape, no option but to accept her fate.

Hitoshi will come out blameless. The pariah, turned hero. The very thing he doesn't deserve to be.

Black and white. Hero and villain. Like it was ever that simple. Like he wasn't reckless as Toga, and overconfident as Spinner, and self-obsessed as Compress. Like he wasn't as lost as Hagakure. Like he didn't live with them, didn't empathize with them, didn't befriend them, didn't—for a moment—think of them as family.

Like they weren't just *people*. People he became impossibly close to.

The whole time, he was lying to them. The whole time, they were doing horrible things. And then, when they found out he was lying, they did horrible things *to him*. Yet even now, Hitoshi doesn't know if he regrets the closeness or the lies.

He should be terrified. He should *hate* them. But they're *just* people. They could be horrible - they could also be kind. They could be radical - they could also be nuanced. Some of them tortured him - one of them saved his life.

If he can, he wants to repay her the favour.

The heat of his breath disperses across his cheeks and into the wind. He hugs his arms around himself, eyes slipping open to the long drop below, how far he has to fall.

Back inside, he slides the balcony shut gently. He takes his time crossing the room, and longer still to open the bedroom door. He hesitates for only a second, waiting for doubt to catch up, for fear to kick in, for cold feet to drag him back. But there's nothing but the path laid bright and clear ahead. He marvels at his own certainty.

In the kitchen, mom and Aizawa fall silent at his approach.

"I'm thinking of doing something really stupid," Hitoshi says without preamble. "But... I want your opinion on it first."

Nedzu arrives later that morning, prim and business-like, Tsukauchi on his heels and wearing such a grave expression Hitoshi nearly wonders if he's about to be arrested after all.

They paint an odd picture, the five of them, clustered around Aizawa's living room. Aizawa, for once, isn't perched in some corner, eyeing the scene from a distance, but plants himself directly at Hitoshi's shoulder, bracketing him with mom at his opposite side.

They had tried to stop him, at first. Of course they had. The whole morning was spent in debate - the longest, and perhaps most honest conversation Hitoshi's had so far.

You don't have to do this, they'd told him, and, *This isn't your*

responsibility.

He told them the truth. He doesn't care. He wants to do it.

Mom had probed, her quirk flitting around the edges of his mind, invasive in a way she so rarely let herself be. Hitoshi bore it, and told them again.

He wants to do it. He wants to *try*.

He doesn't have the words for the rest, for how he wants to try, *needs* to try, to show her that she can come back. Because if he can do this, if he can take this plunge, lead this charge, from villain to hero, then so can she. If he can bear the slander and the shame and vitriolic hatred, and cultivate a place in the world despite it, then so can she. If he can pierce a hole in the darkness that shrouds them both, can let the light pour through to illuminate what's always been beneath, then so can she, and so can everyone else like them.

Aizawa and mom don't have to like it, and they've made clear that they don't, but they sit beside him now, a silent solidarity. With it, Hitoshi feels a fraction of the fall lessen.

Nedzu clears his throat, capturing the room's attention. "I'm sure there's little need to recount the situation we were all made aware of last night," he says. "Suffice to say that due to an unfortunate breach of information at the Musutafu PD—the source of which Detective Tsukauchi is actively working to track down—the public has been made aware of Shinsou's return to Pro Hero custody and civilian life. Now, while this situation presents some obvious complications, I believe it is also an opportunity to make our story, however we choose to shape it, clearly and widely understood. I myself have a few suggestions."

"Actually," Hitoshi cuts in, and watches with mild satisfaction at the flicker of surprise on Nedzu's face. He blows out a long breath, and seals his fate. "I'm going to take the fall."

Sympathetic

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Working two jobs since the age of twenty-five, Shouta had always imagined two straight weeks of paid leave to be something of a pipe dream, reserved for the far-flung possibility of retirement, or the much more probable reality of a vegetative coma.

Still, his first morning back at UA and one staff meeting later, it feels like he was never gone.

Nedzu calls the meeting the Monday after Hitoshi's story goes public. At last, he brings the rest of the UA staff up to speed on the whole mess of the situation, from Hitoshi's secret training last semester to his capture by the League to Hagakure's confession. It's almost a wonder he doesn't have a slideshow prepared for the occasion. The story slides off his silver tongue like the plot of an overcomplicated thriller - riveting, rehearsed, and completely fucking insane.

Where the perfunctory, "Any questions?" is not normally met with impatient silence, this time, no one's upset when the meeting inevitably runs late. No kidding. They've got a shit ton of questions.

Nedzu's in his element, soothing incredulity and outrage like a surgeon stitches up a wound. Precise, brutal, and necessary. *We did what we had to*. Shouta sinks in his seat.

There's only one other mouth not spilling over with indignation. Toshinori has been covering 1-A's homeroom these past weeks, and Shouta's pretty sure it's not the extra grading that's got him scowling like that. He ducks the glare from across the boardroom table, and tries not to feel like a coward.

Hitoshi's version of the story has only been out to the public for a little under 72 hours, but it's gone off like a bomb, an explosion felt nation-wide, streaming down through TV screens and tabloid covers and touchscreen phones in every household and street corner.

Nedzu already has a tour of press appearances lined up for next week, to help circulate the story even more, effectively rendering it UA's official statement, and one that shines them in a far better light than any of them deserve. Any of them but Hitoshi.

I'm going to take the fall, he'd said, with more conviction than Shouta could put to words, and more sincerity than anything he'd said since returning home. Still, Shouta wishes he'd pushed back harder, pried deeper, taken him by the shoulders and shaken the thought loose from his head, the words from his tongue he'd refused to say.

Hitoshi's story starts with the truth, the presence of a traitor inside UA. It goes on to tell how he was hired by Nedzu to sniff the traitor out, and later propositioned by Kurogiri as a result. It even goes as far as having Nedzu cut the mission short. But here, it veers sharply from the truth.

In Hitoshi's story, he grows resentful of the sudden dismissal, and that resentment morphs to anger, to hatred, the volatile emotions of an isolated teenager, easily persuaded by those of like mind. He joins the League in retribution, where he is further radicalized and indoctrinated, eventually becoming a full-fledged member. In Hitoshi's story, he's a *villain*, through and through.

That is until he witnesses the abuse of a young girl at the hands of one of the League's business partners—the Eight Precepts. This sparks a sudden change of heart. In this version of events, Hitoshi only has the chance to feed intel back to Shouta once - during their brief encounter at Golden Heights Bank. This is the linchpin of the story - the moment of remorse, of regret, of Hitoshi's true colours bleeding through. It's just enough to guarantee the young girl's freedom. It's also the moment the League starts to doubt him, and the walls begin to close in. No longer is he their beloved poster child. Now, he becomes their prisoner.

He remains with the League for another few weeks, until he finally makes his escape the night of January 3rd, only to run into Uraraka Ochako while on patrol. The two are captured, and later Hitoshi sacrifices himself in order to guarantee her escape. UA, having caught their own traitor in the meantime, orchestrates an exchange. And thus Hitoshi returns, beaten, scarred, and forever marked by his stint as a villain. Whether it's a stain the world will be able to look past, let alone forgive, remains to be seen.

It's not true. It's not *fair*. But it's the story Hitoshi has asked them to tell.

Already, it's spread like wildfire, igniting everything in its path. Caught dead in its center is a new figure, a name hardly ever spoken before, a face entirely unknown. The so-called *other* UA traitor.

Hagakure Tooru.

The tabloids have wasted no time in digging into her, no kinder than they were to Hitoshi - with the added benefit of an even more absurd degree of speculation, due to how little they've been able to excavate. Rumours leap like sparks, from the shady circumstances of her defection, to what few clips of TV footage exist of her at the Sports Festival, to, most ruthlessly of all, her family.

Her father - a former public figure, fallen from grace into relative anonymity - bears the nearly parallel force of the limelight. Online videos of his former battles and public appearances skyrocket in view counts. Interviews with old friends and coworkers litter the news cycle, dripping with salacious and unsavory details. Someone tracks down the receipts of a short-lived stay in a rehab center.

The fire rages, and rages, and finds yet more kindling in Hagakure's mother - a torch the woman seems only all-too-happy to bear.

Fukumen Asano, who has neither seen nor spoken to her daughter in over two years, makes a national TV appearance six hours after Hitoshi's story goes live, and another three on smaller, local channels in the following days. She writes a front-page news column. She hosts a public livestream on her personal social media. She signs a publishing deal.

Shouta's seen more of the woman in the last 48 hours than he does of even Hitoshi. The Shinsou's have yet to make a single public appearance, citing Hitoshi's need to recover in private. It's hardly a stretch. Though he hides it well, Shouta knows the damage runs deeper than any of them have yet to truly see. According to Haru, he's hardly slept more than a few hours in the past three days, and though he's begun to speak more regularly, his voice still harbours a harsh, painful-sounding rasp.

The coldhearted Pro in Shouta can't help but wonder how it might negatively impact the effectiveness of Hitoshi's quirk, but there won't be any way to know until he starts using it again. It hardly seems to be the first thing on Hitoshi's list of priorities, so Shouta tries not to rank it too high himself.

He does wonder at how the isolation is treating him. Even just a week behind the same four walls can start to wear on a person, especially coming off the adrenaline high of living with the League of Villains, when every waking hour demanded hypervigilance, when every

breath was calculated and precise.

Shouta's always been one to throw himself into routine, to beat down the nightmares and demons by virtue of just being too damn exhausted to have them in the first place. Hitoshi needs privacy, and comfort, and *time*, of course, but there's something to be said for the simplicity of a schedule, reliable routine and people to share it with. Hell, healthy interactions with *kids his age*, people who've been through even just a fraction of what he has.

Or maybe Shouta's just trying to convince himself.

Either way, he's not going to force the matter, but it's an open offer, and he wants to make sure that's understood by all parties.

He'd found Nedzu in his office earlier that morning to say as much. There was a stack of paperwork on his desk nearly half the man's height, and Shouta was loath to think what his email inbox must look like on the other side of that screen.

"When this is all over," he said without preamble, "I want to offer the spot in 1-A to Shinsou."

Nedzu did him the honour of lifting his eyes from the screen, but his claws continued to skip across the keys. "You believe that to be wise?"

Shouta bristled. "You think he can't do it?"

"Hardly. The boy is a wealth of untapped potential. But do you believe *yourself* best suited to help him achieve that potential?"

The question rocked him. He hadn't considered that there could be anyone else. "I do."

"Hmm," Nedzu said, as if disappointed in the answer. The typing halted at last, the stare even, eyes narrowed in a challenge. "Your judgement of Shinsou is severely compromised, Aizawa. You like him far too much."

Shouta had nothing to hide, and no point in trying to. "I do."

Nedzu had smiled then. "Good. I'll have his file transferred."

Now, only a few hours later, Nedzu makes this same declaration to the rest of the staff, and adjourns the staff meeting with the eye-rolling declaration that all staff need sign up for an extra hour of media

training.

Shouta beats a hasty retreat back to the 1-A classroom, feeling the eyes of his colleagues on his back, heavy with judgment. He supposes there is some small cosmic justice in the fact that he, at least, must suffer their scrutiny, if Hitoshi is to suffer the rest of the world's. Among these small few, the truth is known - what really happened, and who's to blame.

He's startled when a figure joins him in step. Toshinori stares forward with his narrow jaw set, silent in the long march to 1-A. The classroom is still empty - granting a measly few minutes' reprieve before the bell rings out across campus and the students start pouring in. Where Shouta normally basks in the quiet, now, he can't help but feel cornered in it.

He moves to the desk, putting distance between them like a shield. Toshinori has left his things largely untouched, down the sleeping bag stuffed in the bottom drawer. He gazes over the chalkboard, the podium, the rows of empty desks, and feels a fondness settle over him, a quiet realization. He's missed this.

"We were going over the chapter on property laws. The one you assigned before the break," Toshinori says. "We only got about halfway through the quiz, I apologize."

Shouta waves a hand. "I'm sure there were plenty of distractions." The news of Hitoshi's return and Hagakure's betrayal was only days ago - the version of it the students will know, anyway. It's no small wonder Toshinori was able to get through any lessons at all.

"Will you talk to them about her?"

"I don't think they're going to give me a choice." He aims for levity, and judging by Toshinori's dead-eyed reaction, misses a mile wide. He clears his throat. "I'll give them as much time as they need, of course."

"They're upset. She was their friend."

"I know." The girls will take it especially hard - they were closest.

Something in Toshinori's face loosens. "She was a good student. I'm sorry that I never got to know her as well as I should have."

A million missed opportunities, red flags and regrets. The sting of Shouta's blindness hasn't been lessened by the anger, only numbed.

“Me too.”

Toshinori gazes out over the grounds. “Our time is coming to a close, Shouta,” he sighs. “Yours as well as mine. You’re not as young as you used to be. They’ll catch up to you before you know it.”

Shouta forfeits the shield, coming to stand at Toshinori’s side by the windows. The bell sounds out. Across campus, the students begin to trickle out of the dorms. They’ll be here any minute.

“That’s why we’re here. So one day, they can stand where we have.” Toshinori smiles, bittersweet and proud, shrugs his arms as if in indifference to their frailty. “I’m not as strong as I used to be, but I’m not afraid for the future. The students... They see the world so much differently than we do, and they’ll have the power to change it in ways we never could.” He turns back to Shouta. “The future they create may not reflect upon us kindly. None of us are without fault. There will be consequences for our mistakes, for our wrongdoings. No one is above that.”

“I know,” Shouta admits quietly. “Myself included.”

Toshinori looks at him, hard. There’s a faint line of accusation in his voice. “You’ll support Shinsou, in whatever comes next?”

“Of course.”

“Even if it doesn’t reflect upon *you* kindly?”

“All Might,” Shouta says roughly. “*Of course* I will.”

Toshinori watches him a moment longer, mouth a thin line, a judgement. At last, he breaks away. Nods to himself. “Good. I’d like to do the same. I’d like to help him, however I can.”

There’s a lot of work that needs to be done to repair Hitoshi’s reputation, and more still to shape the world into the kind of place that would welcome him back, that would be willing to look past the supposed deceit to see the heart of the person beneath. Shouta is glad for whatever help they can get.

“Thank you.”

Toshinori takes his leave before the students arrive, and Shouta hardly has a moment to bolster himself before the door slams open again.

Midoriya stops dead at the sight of him. "Sensei! Where have you been? Are you okay? Is it- It's not *true*, is it?"

Shouta holds up a hand. "Let's give everyone a minute, okay?"

The others pour in behind him, uneasy murmurs giving way to dead silence. At last, they all sit before him, nineteen familiar faces, a single empty desk. Shouta's eyes nearly skip over it, so used to the lack - no gaze to meet, no expression to read, no reason to think twice. Regret burns in his chest.

He plants his hip on the edge of the desk, dismissing the podium and the image of formality it carries. He breathes out a long sigh.

He tells them what he can.

There are questions, and more than a few tears. There are outbursts - anger and confusion, indignation and denial. He allows it all without judgement. Emotions will settle, with time. They're a tight-knit group of kids - they'll soothe and comfort each other, as best they're able, and he'll offer what encouragement he can, along the way.

They run overtime, cutting into Mic's English lesson, but nobody comes to interrupt them. He's sure the whole school must be in a similar state. By the time lunch period rolls around, the students look about as wrung out as he feels. He leaves them without homework and the promise of an afternoon free of training, and mentally plots his escape route to the teacher's lounge as soon as they're out of sight.

A lingering figure cuts the dream short.

Uraraka holds herself tall, jaw set and fists clenched at her sides. Her whole body rigid, as though straining against some great weight. But when she speaks, her voice is uncharacteristically small.

"Sensei, that night in Saitama, the night that I f-fought Shinsou..." The words hitch with emotion. She swallows it down. "He tried to tell me. In the alley, he was trying to *tell me* that he was on my side."

Shouta can imagine their fight beat for beat. He's heard the story twice now, once from Uraraka's police report, and again from Hitoshi's notebook. It was an impossible situation, no matter the angle. Hitoshi, so close to freedom, caught in bad luck and worse timing.

"You had no reason to believe him," he says gently.

"But I might have." Her cheeks burn with shame. "If it wasn't for his quirk, I might have at least heard him out."

Impossibly, the tangled knot of regrets that live behind his ribs makes room for one more. Uraraka's going to live with this guilt for the rest of her life. But she was right to do it. The pragmatic, coldhearted, bastard of a teacher within him knows that. Hitoshi may not be a villain, but it would have been impossible to know in that moment.

"If he had really been with the League, he'd have said the exact same thing. He'd have tried to trick you. You were smart not to fall for it," Shouta says. "It was a mistake, and I'm— I'm proud of you for owning up to it. But don't beat yourself up for it, okay?"

She nods fiercely. Sniffles, once. "I'm going to make it up to him."

The regret softens by a fraction. Shouta doesn't doubt for a moment that she will.

With Aizawa back at work, their brief stint of living out of his house comes to a close. Hitoshi, who never unpacked his bag to begin with, helps mom gather her things. Their temporary safety bubble vanishes, and his world rearranges itself once more.

There's a UA-sanctioned protection detail to accompany them back to their own apartment. The street is quieter than he's ever seen it, closed to all but local traffic by a set of police checkpoints on either end of the block, and a pair of security guards greet them in the lobby. Nedzu's work, he's sure. Hitoshi somehow can't bring himself to be grateful.

The apartment itself is suspiciously clean. Not so much as a dish in the sink or a sock on the floor, as though mom has somehow forgotten to

live here in all the time he's been away.

His bedroom is almost exactly as he left it, with the exception of his bed, which has been made, and his phone, which has been placed on the bedside table and plugged in to charge. Everything else appears untouched, down the blinds he left half-closed and the cram school homework he left crumpled on the corner of his desk.

The normality of it borders on absurd. Hitoshi stands like a stranger in his own home, everything foreign in the way that only time and distance can make it.

He clears a small space on his desk for Eri's drawing. He puts his collection of pills next to it - antibiotic, painkiller, sedative - arranged neatly with the labels facing out. He sits on the edge of his bed and stares at the last one with no small amount of dread, the promise of evening creeping in through the ever-darkening window. Time sinks around him, leaden. Hitoshi wonders who he will be when it starts up again.

There's a knock on the door some hours later, summoning him to dinner. Outside, it's already pitch black. He rises mechanically, and barely remembers to summon a semblance of life to his face before he steps out.

Dinner's an old friend, predictable. Almond vegetable curry, mom's favourite. The familiar scent does something funny to his lungs. He clatters around in the utensil drawer longer than necessary, reminding himself to breathe. But even the sweet aroma of home cooking can't overcome the nausea that settles as the hour lengthens and the inevitable monster of night looms over him.

He's halfway through his plate before he has to forfeit, stomach roped in knots of dread. The leftovers are hastily packaged—he doesn't quite have the heart to throw them away—before he slips away to the bathroom.

There, he hangs his head over the sink, gasping raggedly. Wet heat wells up behind his lids, and he's *embarrassed*. It's just sleep. But his dreams are horrid, and *loud*, and he always wakes blinded, limbs locked in fear, or worse - can't wake at all, trapped in some endless, feverish hellscape.

He desperately craves whatever they had him on in the hospital - the blissful hours of nothingness it granted. What he wouldn't give just to be knocked out. God. What he wouldn't give for a *drink*.

Instead, he sits in his room, sober as the grave, and does his best impression of Aizawa - glaring, unblinking, at the shadows, until his eyes pulse with exhaustion.

His phone blinks on the nightstand. Eventually, morbid curiosity takes over, the rapid swipe of muscle memory unlocking the crowded homescreen. He checks his texts first. The unknown number—the one declaring his opening in the League from all those months ago—is gone. There's a flurry of other notifications though - spam emails to clear and DMs to block and a barrage of colourful death threats painted across his social media accounts, which he painstakingly deletes, one by one.

He lies in bed with his face half-squished into the pillow, types his name into the search bar - gets an autofill by the second character. The top result is a Channel 54 story, which appears to be a recap of the past week's whirlwind media storm. *Shinsou Hitoshi released from custody, reveals identity of another UA traitor.* Other online news outlets follow suit, the titles increasingly outlandish as he scrolls. *Invisible Infiltration? The Shinsou Hoax!* He bypasses them, and several older articles detailing the Pro raid on the Saitama base, the robbery of Golden Heights, and the destruction of All Might's statue in Shihori Park.

He returns to the search bar and types in another name.

Real UA Traitor? Hagakure Tooru: everything we know so far!

The results punch the breath from his chest and send his pulse roaring through his ears. The media has found something new to sink its teeth into, and the carnage is immediate. Her quirk scrutinized, her personality dissected, and *god*, her *family*.

There are horror stories about her dad, rumours of debt and bankruptcy, old videos dredged up of the man arriving to social functions inebriated and having to be escorted out by security. There are personal stories - complaints from old bosses and coworkers of inappropriate conduct, of corruption, of *unnecessary use of force*.

Genki Hagakure, the Force Hero , known by his professional name *G Force*, had the ability to manipulate an invisible force, which he could use to push, pull, and pin his enemies in place. He was a hometown hero and wildly popular in his heyday in the 2010s. For a brief time he even cracked the Top 100 national heroes, coming in at Number 88, before he rapidly dropped off to obscurity the following year,

citing family issues for an early retirement. *QuirkBlog has reached out, but Hagakure Genki has declined to comment.*

His ex-wife, however, has had no such qualms.

"Tooru was always a difficult child," Fukuken Asano says, to anyone who will listen. "She didn't have many friends. Like any mother, I tried to give my daughter the best life, but I always felt so isolated due to the scrutiny of public life and Tooru's need for constant attention, which became all the more intense when her quirk developed. There were times I felt trapped, caught between a husband the world knew and a daughter they didn't. Sometimes it was as if *I* didn't even know her."

Fukumen Asano has made a deal with Elite Publishing. Her tell-all memoir is set for release this spring.

Hitoshi bites his tongue hard enough to taste blood. Anger curls like fire though his chest. He clicks on a related article, finds a video of another interview. Her hair falls artfully over her shoulders, makeup unsmudged despite her wet eyes, which she dabs at excessively. "It's so hard to hear what they're saying about Tooru," Fukumen sighs. "And so much harder to know it's all *true*."

He fights the urge to fling his phone across the room, settles instead for slamming it down onto the bedside table. He stares up at the ceiling, breath ragged. The urge to *move* sings through him, but there's nowhere to go, nothing to do, no way to combat this feeling, this rage that is so old and so new and so raw, but to lay there and wait for it to settle like sediment in the bed of his veins.

His dreams, when they come, are fury and steel. A teary-eyed woman lies crumpled at his feet. His quirk drips like blood from his tongue as he forces her to stand, and beneath her perfect makeup her face is etched in fear. He pins her in place, and raises an arm, except his body is not his own, and the hand that he closes around her throat sings with decay.

He wakes with Fukumen Asano's screams tearing at his lungs. His sheets twist around him like barbed wire, and he thrashes free, a sob caught behind his teeth. The door flies open.

He knows it's mom, he *knows* it's mom, but he can't help but cower.

"Don't touch me," he gasps. His neck screams, sore and tight and *hot*, muscles taut like corded ropes, and he breathes in ragged, open-

mouthed pants, fighting the dark spots in his vision.

“You’re okay, it’s okay. I’m right here.” Her quirk laps at him like waves over sand, soothing, trying to smother his panic.

Anger blooms behind it. “Stop it,” he spits, and slaps away the hand hovering over him. “Get away from me.”

“Hitoshi—”

“Give me some fucking space.” He kicks himself free at last, sits up and drags his hands through sweat-soaked hair. The dark spots retreat, but he can’t bring himself to look at her. “I’m *fine*.”

She backs up to the door, but hesitates. Her eyes glisten, then, “Do you want the lights on or off?”

“Just go,” he snaps.

She does.

He feels bad about it, in the morning.

Daylight trickles through the blinds, and the world softens by degrees. Against it, last night looks all the uglier.

There’s a weird, unspoken tension sitting between them, but mom’s either ignoring it or playing dumb. She gives him as much space as their tiny apartment will allow, and for some inexplicable reason this irritates him even more, which in turns makes him feel even guiltier.

He hates that his mask cracked, and hates even more that mom had to bear the brunt of it.

It's not like she can go anywhere, with the way he's dragged their family name through the mud these past months. She isn't even working anymore, and Hitoshi hasn't worked up the courage to ask if that was her choice or her boss's. As it is, all they can do is shutter the windows and hunker down against the shitshow their lives have become.

Hitoshi eats an actual breakfast, then decides to keep up the streak by

taking a shower. The hot water irritates his neck, so he turns it cold instead, stands under the frigid spray until it numbs the itch and prunes his fingers and makes him feel somewhat human again.

He dries off carefully, patting the tender skin of his throat, tracing the ridges of scar tissue. He considers re-bandaging it, but hesitates. In the mirror, he has a clearer view of the damage. He forces his eyes to settle where they've too often skipped over.

The scar looks about as bad as it feels - an ugly but identifiably hand-shaped spot of raised and reddened flesh. It wraps around his throat and the left side of his neck, the thumb below his jaw, the palm across his larynx, the crooked imprint of fingers so long they nearly graze the back of his spine. With some slight contortion, he can fit his own hand neatly over it, and for some reason this makes him cry, which he does silently and without fanfare until he is finished, then pats his face dry and exits the bathroom.

Mom's in the kitchen, lathering up the abandoned dishes from his breakfast, and now he *really* feels bad. He lingers in the hallway, working up the courage to apologize, then gives up and simply starts drying the dishes in solidarity beside her.

The tension bleeds away after a moment. Mom keeps her eyes focused on the task, but a small, sad smile presses at the corner of her lips.

There's a sharp knock at the door.

They both freeze, and lock eyes. Mom wraps a soapy fist around a knife. Hitoshi says very quietly, "*Mom.*"

They wouldn't let anybody into the building that couldn't pass the security check. The media has been strictly forbidden. The League simply wouldn't knock.

Hitoshi puts a hand on her elbow, and lowers it back to the sink. He approaches the door with soft, careful steps, mom hovering over his shoulder. A glance through the peephole yields an empty hallway, and Hitoshi frowns, until he hears the knock come again, this time from a noticeable two feet off the ground.

He opens the door.

Nedzu shakes a light dusting of snow off his suit jacket before dipping into a polite bow. "Good morning, Shinsou. Mrs. Shinsou, a fine knife you have there. May I enter?"

Hitoshi holds the door. Nedzu steps though, and doesn't so much look around as instantly assess the entirety of the apartment in a single glance. He leads his own way to the living room, and clambers up onto an armchair without invitation.

Hitoshi takes the opportunity to convey a number of silent messages to mom, which include, *Did you know he was coming?* and, *I'm fine, are you?* and, *Please put the knife away.*

By the time Nedzu turns to face them, they've both gathered their wits, and Hitoshi's mask is firmly in place. He fixes Nedzu with full and grave attention, the way he knows the man likes.

"I hope you've been well." Nedzu's eyes flit to Hitoshi's newly exposed neck, but have the tact not to linger.

He doesn't entertain the small talk except to offer a curt, "Thank you."

Nedzu sighs. "I will be short with you. I've recently received a request from Channel 54 for the exclusive rights to a sit-down interview with you. The story would run as part of a larger segment including input from UA officials such as All Might and myself, as well as previously-unseen police evidence on the matters of your detainment and torture at the hands of the League. We have been offered partial input on the program's script, direction, and advertisement packaging."

Hitoshi gives himself a moment to process. The word *torture* clangs around in his head. He hadn't until that very moment heard it out loud.

"What does *partial input* look like?" mom asks.

"The network maintains that their 'devotion to the truth' will not be outstripped. But they are a highly reputable, national-level, and historically hero-neutral outlet. It will be a hard-hitting, one-on-one interview, but the questions will be subjected to an audit. I am confident that with the right preparation, this could be a huge step in shifting the public perception of Shinsou's situation." His voice is even, calm - that of a man speaking to his equal, though Hitoshi doubts Nedzu views him as any such thing. Still, he makes a good show of it.

"They are proposing that we film it at their Tokyo studio next Friday, and for it to be aired the following Saturday evening. I would offer you whatever assistance I can in preparation. However, you need only say the word and I can postpone or even decline the invitation

outright. But for your own sake, I believe it would be a wise choice to accept.”

Hitoshi gazes down at him. Is there genuine empathy in there, behind the pretty words? A genuine desire to help him? Guilt, perhaps, that Hitoshi took the fall that would have otherwise been Nedzu’s? It seems *beneath* someone like Nedzu, and yet Hitoshi can’t help but want to think it’s there.

“It sounds like a good idea,” he says at last.

Nedzu straightens. “We cannot take back what has already been put forth to the public. However we need to change the perception of you as a *perpetrator* to you as a *victim*. This will involve displays of vulnerability, on your part. Chagrin, anger - these are natural, of course, and will be expected, but you must be careful not to appear flippant at any point. You must show remorse, show pain.” His focus flickers to mom. “With your consent, explicit medical evidence will be the most compelling, in this regard.” Back to Hitoshi. “It will make you appear sympathetic.”

Compartmentalize, his brain gasps. “I can do that.”

“Of that, I have no doubt,” Nedzu smiles. “Mrs Shinsou, we will need you present for the interview as well. The main focus will be Shinsou, of course, but to have you at his side, pledging your support as a mother, will shine him in a more youthful light and paint a more relatable picture for the viewers.”

Hagakure won’t have it as easy. She won’t have her mom there, to help her look youthful and relatable and sympathetic. She won’t have anyone.

“I want to do it alone.”

The smile slips away to a curious frown. Nedzu fixes him with a long, quiet look. “May I ask why?”

Hitoshi is struck with the sudden, inexplicable urge to lie, to hide this part of himself, to play these cards closer than most. The feeling climbs up out of the darkness within him, born of shame, or maybe fear. There’s no time to analyze it any further. He scrambles for a lie - but then, Nedzu has already seen his hesitation, hasn’t he? So he abandons the thought, thinks of a way to reframe the truth instead.

There’s a tilt to Nedzu’s head, the slightest change of posture as he

leans forward, as though trying to catch Hitoshi in a different light. There is something like wonder in his eyes.

He's seen it, then. The change in him, the mask. Hitoshi feels a surge of protectiveness; it's *his*, and Nedzu will think he understands, but he won't, really.

"I made the decision to join the League alone. And as far as the world knows, I made the decision to defect alone, too. My mom has nothing to do with it."

"You will be making your own life more difficult," Nedzu tells him, without accusation.

"That's the story I want to tell."

Nedzu glances to mom, a silent question.

She hesitates, then, "We do it Hitoshi's way or we don't do it at all."

Nedzu clears his throat and adjusts in his seat - a split-second recalibration. "Very well. Your parameters are disagreeable, but clear, and I will respect them. Is there anything else I should know?"

"We don't talk about my dad either," Hitoshi says, after some thought.

"Noted." He gives a thin smile. "The story will begin with a recap of the past few months, and end with a hopeful look toward the future, promising your return to UA, where we will welcome you back with open arms and full trust, as a 1-A student."

It's as though this is supposed to be the grand culmination, the victorious homecoming, the awe-struck revelation that everything has at last fallen into place - the path ahead laid bright and clear. A single step and it's his for the taking. There's an implicit understanding that he *should*, and for a moment, Hitoshi entertains the possibility that he *will*.

But the vision of himself there carries none of the weight it once did, none of the fervor or hunger or drive. The words wash over him, and he is a ship moored. Two-dimensional, unable to imagine moving forward or back, unable to stand anywhere other than where he is precisely at this moment.

"I'm not returning to UA."

Nedzu's mouth snaps shut. In all the time that Hitoshi has known him, never has an expression been written more clearly upon his face. The silence is nothing short of incredulous.

Even mom has her knuckles mashed against her lips, which she quickly retracts, smoothing herself out like an afterthought. He can only feel bad that he didn't inform her ahead of time. Then again, he's hardly given it an ounce of thought in all these months. Somehow, in hindsight, it seems so obvious.

"There's no place for me in a school for heroes."

Nedzu abruptly composes himself. "I am disappointed to hear that you feel that way. I hope you know that I don't at all see the situation in the same light."

Hitoshi nods, unerringly calm. "I had my stint at being a hero. We all saw how it worked out."

"Indeed," Nedzu says curtly. "And that is your decision to make, and one which I shall leave you to make in peace." He slides to his feet. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I will contact Channel 54 to finalize the details," he says, but Hitoshi sees the retreat for what it is. Nedzu is a master manipulator, and an incredible liar, but everyone has their tells. After all, he learned from the best.

"I'll be in touch tomorrow so that we may begin our preparation in earnest," Nedzu says, and offers a bow. "Until then, Shinsou."

Hitoshi nods. "Until then."

He doesn't see him out

Chapter End Notes

Whew! This chapter ended up being super long (compared to my usual) but I elected to keep it that way to preserve the flow. Lots of pieces being moved around on the chess board as we head into our last 2-3 arcs of this fic!

To be clear, Hitoshi's version of events (as described by Aizawa at the beginning of this chapter) is what has been released to the public, including the students of UA. As far as they all know, Hitoshi really *did* defect to the LOV, though later had a change of heart after learning about Eri, and was genuinely attempting to escape the night he ran into Uraraka. The teachers however have

been brought up to speed on the *actual* course of events, namely that Hitoshi was playing double agent the whole time with the League.

Happy new year and thanks for still being here!!!

Exposed

Chapter Notes

TW for frank discussions of nicotine withdrawal in this chapter.
Don't smoke, kids.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Well, Shinsou, the fractures are healing remarkably well.” A doctor with thinning hair and crow’s feet smiles down at him, all benevolence. The look is somewhat lost in sunspots from the flashlight that was just shone into Hitoshi's pupils.

The doctor pockets the flashlight and pulls out a pen with a definitive click. “Any more headaches?”

It’s like there’s cotton in his ears - the words have to worm their way past before they register. He’s been poked and prodded for the better part of a half hour, and his nerves are buzzing loudly in protest, overtaxed and unsure if there’s danger. “No.”

“Excellent. And the antibiotics are finished, yes?”

Hitoshi flexes his socked feet. The cuts are healed up, too. They don’t hurt unless he thinks about them, and even then, he knows it’s just in his head. “Yes.”

The doctor writes something. Hitoshi cranes his neck to try to see, but the script is illegible from this angle. “Okay, so then we’ll just renew the sleep aid this time around, hm?”

Hitoshi trades a glance with mom, seated across the examination room, who seems to be having an equal lack of success at reading the doctor’s notes from her position. They both know what shit luck he’s been having with the sleeping pills, but she holds her silence. Like she has been, all these weeks - giving him space, giving him time, letting him define the shape and pace of every interaction.

“Do you... have anything stronger?” Hitoshi asks.

The doctor pauses. The wrinkles around his eyes deepen by a fraction. “What do you mean?”

“Just... they’re not really helping. The dreams are still—” He waves a

hand, lost for words. "I still dream."

The doctor levels him a steady look. "We can try something else, if you'd like. But at your age, I'm not comfortable prescribing any higher dosages."

He shrugs in feigned nonchalance. "Yeah, okay."

The doctor studies him a moment more before scratching down another note. The nerves under Hitoshi's skin jump like static. *Danger danger danger*. He rubs at his arms to quiet them.

"What about your throat?" the doctor changes the subject abruptly. "I see you've taken the bandages off. Any discomfort?"

When the air is too cold. When the food is too hot. Right before bed, and first thing in the morning. When he's out of breath. Or he's been speaking too much. "Sometimes."

The doctor hums sympathetically. "That's to be expected. Don't strain yourself."

"What about his quirk?" mom pipes up. "Could the injuries have had any effect?"

Hitoshi looks at her evenly, surprised by the question but unwilling to show it. She holds the stare back, a challenge.

They didn't talk about it - his decision to drop out of UA, to give up on being a hero. She won't push, one way or the other, he knows. She's always let him choose his own path, often to his own detriment. But Hitoshi knows she disapproves, can feel it unspoken between them, an ugly disappointment, a failure. It almost makes him laugh - how much heartache would it have saved her, if he'd given up the pipedream a year ago? Six months ago? His quirk has never brought either of them anything but misery.

The doctor grows visibly uncomfortable at the mention. He picks an invisible pit of fluff on the sleeve of his coat. "Well, I suppose it's possible that an injury like this could produce a sort of mental block, yes. But, uh, that's more of a question for a specialist."

"It's okay. I haven't even tried using it," Hitoshi says, eyes still locked with mom's. He smiles, and it's all benevolence. "I don't really see the point."

There's no respite, afterwards. Hitoshi maintains the mask and mom her steely silence while an armed escort takes from the hospital to the police precinct, a man-made shield drawing curious stares and blocking threatening ones. Tsukauchi greets them at the front doors and disperses the crowd, but even inside the station, Hitoshi can feel the startled and incredulous glances from the other officers, one of whom outright *flees* at the sight of him.

Tsukauchi gives him a nudge. "Newbies, am I right?" He's a bit more obvious than Nedzu was, looking at Hitoshi's newly unveiled scar, but tears his eyes away before it gets awkward. "How you feeling, kid?"

Hitoshi weighs his words and settles for honesty. Tsukauchi seems like the kind of guy who likes that sort of thing. "Nervous."

"Would it help if I said, *Don't be?*"

Hitoshi appreciates the levity, though he can't quite bring himself to meet it, already exhausted from the morning's events. It was an early morning, too - woken to the sound of mom arguing with the landlord, who, in not so many words, seems to be trying to convince them to move out. Apparently no one wants to live in an apartment building with a former terrorist. Small wonder.

Judging by the way the PD staff all but dive out of their path, no one wants to work in a building with a former terrorist either. At this point, Hitoshi's starting to think he did 1-A a favour in preventing them from having to share a school with one.

Things are a bit quieter down the hall, where Tsukauchi leads him to a repurposed interrogation room. Hitoshi doesn't realize he's hoping to see Aizawa until it's only Nedzu behind the door. He stifles his disappointment - Aizawa has classes to teach, after all. Life goes on.

"So, I know that we want to be as honest as possible in this interview, all things considered," Tsukauchi says, as they settle around the table. "But there are some subjects we're going to have to be careful about, due to ongoing investigations and other legal matters. One such subject being the Eight Precepts. The story as it stands right now is that it was the mistreatment of Eri that served as your moral awakening after you had been radicalized by the League. This is a big

moment, and people are going to want to know more about it, but we're going to have to be discreet. The trial's coming up, and the defense is going to give us hell for lack of jury impartiality when this thing blows up."

Hitoshi straightens. He hasn't seen or heard of Eri since his discharge from Saitama General. "How is she?"

Tsukauchi takes the change of topic in stride. "She's good. And Chisaki Kai is safely behind bars. Permanently, if everything goes according to plan."

"That's— Overhaul?"

"Ah," Tsukauchi scratches his head. "Guess you'd have known him by his professional name, huh? Yes, that's him."

Hitoshi nods grimly, stomach tight at the reminder. "Good."

Tsukauchi leans in. "If you're interested, by the way, we'd love to have you in as a witness."

He hesitates. "I only met the guy once."

"Honestly? Hate to admit it, but that might have to do. We're pulling teeth with his underlings. Only one of them's talking, and he wasn't exactly in the inner circle."

"Of course, I'll do what I can."

Nedzu clears his throat. "One matter at a time, if you would, Detective."

Hitoshi shakes his head. "No, he's right. If I can help, I want to."

Tsukauchi grins. "Happy to hear it, but Nedzu's right. Let's help *you* first."

Nedzu shuffles his notes. "Right. Let us begin."

They talk for the better part of three hours. Nedzu poses a litany of questions, some ruthless and rapid-fire, others drawn out and

thoughtful, all of which Hitoshi answers to the best of his ability. Afterwards, he and Tsukauchi offer suggestions and critiques.

Together, they craft the story of an emotionally damaged, quirk-discriminated teenager, who had dreams of being a hero, but was let down by those closest to him. He eventually grew to resent them, then was manipulated by those who wanted to feed on that resentment and cultivate it into something darker.

It's believable. With enough care, it's even forgivable. And it's *infuriating* - that it would take so much work, so much careful framing, for the world to understand why someone like Hagakure could have been led astray, let alone to even entertain the possibility that she could be redeemed.

Hitoshi plays his role, follows his script, wears his mask so tight that by the end, he feels brittle and sore beneath it. The interrogation room has no windows, and when he finally stumbles out, it's to find himself bleary-eyed and twitchy beneath the precinct's harsh fluorescents. Back on the main floor, the receptionists shy away. The officers glare openly.

Hitoshi forces himself not to scowl back, and steals a pen off one of their desks in silent retribution. He rolls it restlessly across his knuckles while mom lingers behind with the others, reworking the kinks of their security detail. According to the landlord this morning, the heightened intensity is "making some of the other tenants uncomfortable."

Restlessness morphs to outright irritation. He feels like an abandoned child in a grocery store - everyone *staring*, wondering where he's supposed to be. He digs the pen into the dry skin of his fingers, watches the colour drain from his nails, and nearly leaps out of his own shoes when a figure materializes over his shoulder.

It's Aizawa, wild-haired and breathless, goggles dangling around his neck. Hitoshi swivels to the nearest clock. Did he *sprint* from UA?

"Hey. Heard you were here, and I—" His gaze flickers to Hitoshi's exposed neck. To his face. Back to his neck. "I wanted to help," he recovers.

Hitoshi feels a flush crawl up his skin. He fights the urge to shrink away. What's there to hide? The scar's big enough to see from outer-fucking-space.

"You're a little late," he says petulantly, and bites his tongue. Aizawa has a full time job, *idiot*. He shoves the pen between his teeth and gnaws on the cap.

Aizawa eyes the pen, but doesn't seem interested in its thefted origins. "How'd it go?"

"Fine," he says. Then, "Nedzu said UA's going to give a statement too. That mean you?"

Aizawa shakes his head. "All Might. Nedzu thinks he'll be better received, anyway." He shrugs. "I offered. Still can, if you want. I'll say anything."

The declaration rocks him. Does Aizawa know he's not coming back to UA? Surely Nedzu must have told him by now.

Hitoshi can't help but wonder if Aizawa's disappointed, or simply relieved. He still has a hard time reading the man - the way he says so much in so little. Sometimes if Hitoshi misses even a single flicker of expression, it's like the whole show's over. Other times, he goes and says shit like *that*.

"Oh, good," Mom pulls up beside them at last, and pins Aizawa with a wicked grin. " *You* can talk to the landlord."

Aizawa does exactly that - accompanying them home and all the way to the landlord's door, where he accosts the man in something that, by its legal definition, is not a threat, but for the way he wears an unblinking, near-deranged smile for the entire exchange. The landlord stammers through apology and hurriedly casts the other tenants under the bus. "I've never had a problem with the law," he swears, and proceeds to tell them all about how his daughter is *such a fan of Pros*, *won't you sign this card for her?* Hitoshi's never seen or heard of any such daughter, and bets the man just wants to make a quick buck selling it online.

"The man doesn't have a daughter, does he?" Aizawa says into the silence on the elevator ride up.

"You'd think he had ten of them with the way he keeps raising the

rent,” mom mutters.

“Thought about moving?”

“Might not have a choice, if things keep up.”

It's the first Hitoshi's heard of any such plans - a fact that stings far more than it should. He digs the pen into the meat of his thigh, and wonders if this elevator could go *any* fucking slower.

Mom frowns. “You okay?”

“Fine,” he snaps. The doors squeal open and he elbows past without another word. There's a beat of hesitation before they follow, an itch he can feel crawling up his back. He hunches his shoulders against it, stuffs his key in the lock and feels it stick, and he just wants to get inside, to get *away*, but the fucking door is stuck *again*, even as he rattles the handle, face scrunching up as a sudden, visceral, inexplicable rage races through him like lightning, so fast that before he knows it, he's rearing back to kick the door.

The mask slips. The door clatters in its frame. His breath is unnaturally heavy in the silence that follows.

The movement behind him has frozen, momentarily, but it will start up, any second now. Someone will speak, ask *if he's okay*, or worse still, someone will *touch* him, and Hitoshi has no illusions what reaction that might elicit, in his current state. All he knows is his mask is down, and he doesn't know if he can get it back up, so he doesn't. Instead, he turns without a word, and marches away.

He's halfway down the hall before his brain catches up and politely reminds him that the outside world is hellfire begging for kindling - their hard-won security checkpoint only a temporary barrier to the paparazzi beyond. He pivots for the fire escape.

An evening chill has settled over the sky, and from the fourth floor, they're just high enough to catch a the breeze. Hitoshi gazes over an alley of packing crates and recycling bins - the starting point and finish line of all his early morning runs last year. It's empty at a glance, the sounds of the city distant and murky, but he still hesitates, paralyzed by the mere novelty of being *outside* and *alone*.

Or, not alone.

He wraps his hands around the railing, the metal frigid to the touch,

biting into his skin. The pain of it awakens something inside of him, unfurling like the fronds of a fern after rain. Just like that, the fire of his anger goes out. He hangs his head, *breathes*, and finally, turns to face the ghost at his back.

Aizawa wordlessly tosses something into the air.

Hitoshi catches on instinct, then blinks down at the crumpled cardboard in his hands. A half-empty box of smokes, emblazoned across the front: *Sprint!*

Aizawa holds up a lighter.

If there was any ounce of shame that hadn't already been bled out of him, Hitoshi might be embarrassed how fast the craving takes over. As it is, he's too busy to care. There's a cigarette lit and pinned between his lips in seconds. He inhales like a man drowned - eyes shut and head tilted back as his lungs fill with a warm, buoyant glow.

Aizawa blesses him with a solid thirty seconds of silence, then says, voice even, "You're kind of a dick when you're jonesing."

Hitoshi cracks an eye. "Yeah, well. What more do you expect of a criminal?"

Aizawa ignores the bait. "I'm not here to lecture you. It's okay to be angry. But if you're gonna take it out on someone, let it be me. Not your mom. She's on your side. Has been this whole time."

The glow dims a fraction. He leans back over the railing and watches the ash tumble to the concrete below. The mask is still cracked wide, and he feels ugly and sore beneath it. "Sorry."

Aizawa shrugs, the universal pardon, and gives Hitoshi another moment of silence to recover his wits. "It'll get easier," he says at length.

"Yeah?" Hitoshi scoffs. "Which part?"

"The withdrawal." Aizawa doesn't mince words. "Were you going to say anything?"

"No," he mumbles around the smoke. "Didn't want mom to know."

"Trust me, kid, she knows."

Another piece of his mask topples loose. He feels impossibly exposed.

"That bad?"

"Your teeth have turned yellow," Aizawa says evenly. "Keep it up and soon you'll have a cough like All Might's."

Hitoshi stifles a cringe. He lifts his neck, rolls his tongue around his mouth while he glares out over the alley. Something flickers in the shadows below, and his gaze sharpens, but it's just one of the neighbours, absentmindedly sorting their trash. He leans back, cutting her sightline as a precaution, and waits in silence until the woman retreats. The tension in his body only loosens when the door closes behind her, but the bitter taste in his mouth remains.

Aizawa watches the whole thing without comment. Hitoshi's cigarette smolders like a dying star. He considers lighting another. Aizawa probably wouldn't stop him.

He takes a final drag, feels it churn in his lungs, then stamps the half-burnt cigarette against the rail. He tosses the box back to Aizawa. "You were right. Those *are* trash."

Aizawa huffs, and pockets the box without another word.

The silence settles into something more familiar - the gray glow of twilight stretching over the city, the same way it used to on his walks home from cram lessons. The memory tugs at him, and he stuffs his hands into his pockets. Face neutral once more, he says, "Nedzu told you I'm not coming back?"

"He told me that's what you said." Aizawa looks him over, brow furrowed. "I'm not angry. But can we talk about it?"

Hitoshi shrugs. "What's there to say?"

"I'm the one who asked him to offer you the spot in 1-A."

Another piece clatters loose, and Hitoshi's careful reconstruction wavers. An old, long-forgotten yearning - a small and starved thing, turns its face towards the sun. Does it matter, that it was Aizawa's idea and not just another step in Nedzu's schemes? Would it have changed anything, if Aizawa had asked instead?

Why didn't he?

"It was less of an offer and more of an assumption."

"That's my fault. It should have been me. I just didn't want you to think it was out of pity - that I was being soft, or- or playing favourites." Aizawa shakes his head. "I brought it up to Nedzu, but we both agreed. We both think you would be a good fit." There's a considerable pause, while Aizawa picks something in the distance to scowl at. "But... I'm sure 1-C would be just as happy to have you back, if you'd rather."

Hitoshi laughs. "I strongly doubt that."

Aizawa doesn't argue the point. "Are you saying this because you don't *want* to come back, or because you think you don't deserve to?"

There's a quip on the tip of his tongue - the easy out, the desired response. Hitoshi bites it back, forces himself to hear the question, to *think*. He's not sure there's a difference. He's not sure it *matters*, and he's about to say as much, but his cheeks are warm with shame, his throat tight with something heavy.

"Tell me it's the former, and I'll drop it. We never have to have this conversation again."

I'm on your side, Aizawa had said, and he's done nothing but prove it since. But there's still so much he doesn't know, so much Hitoshi's done, and failed to do. Maybe Aizawa's too blinded by his own guilt in the matter to see it, but Hitoshi's done *nothing* to earn himself a place in UA, let alone in 1-A.

He's spent years willfully blinded to the truth, head in the sand so that he didn't have to face it, or risk what facing it might mean. He did everything he could to pretend that if he just worked hard enough, for long enough, that he could fix everything, that he could tip back the cosmic scales of injustice, that he could *earn* it. He lied to himself better than he ever could have out loud. He did it for sixteen years. And now that he's finally comfortable living in that lie, playing that role, wearing that mask, he's realized that the only person he can't fool anymore is himself.

"Let's just face it, okay?" he pleads. "Let's just be honest, for once. There's a reason I didn't pass the entrance exam. There's a reason I didn't win the Sports Festival. There's a reason I couldn't save Hagakure." Finally, he puts it to words. *Save*.

Aizawa looks-- pitying, maybe. Hitoshi doesn't know. His eyes ache. He's so *tired* of this - the calculating, the second guessing, the searching, *always* searching.

"Hitoshi, the mission wasn't to save her. It was to expose her."

"Well, there's more than one way to be a hero," he snaps. "And I failed at all of them. Look, I'm not delusional - I know what I'm up against. I wouldn't stand a chance in 1-A. I don't have a hero's quirk."

"Fuck your quirk," Aizawa says, laced with venom and ice. "You *are* a hero. Not because of your quirk, but because you're smart and brave and *good*. You saved All Might from the attack on UA, you saved Uraraka from being captured. Hell, you saved Eri from a *lifetime* of suffering. Your quirk helped, but it didn't *do* those things - *you* did." Aizawa's breathing hard, as though fighting to get the words out, to make them heard. "Yes, this institution is biased, and you're right - it doesn't favour you. But you have a chance to change that, from the inside out. A chance to come back to the place and the people that exiled you and prove them *wrong*."

Hitoshi closes his eyes against the rush of it - the fervor and the passion, a storm beating down against the rust and ruin of sixteen years. What would he have given to hear that, as a child? Hell, just months ago? To give that to *her*.

"Would you offer the same chance to Hagakure, if she came back?"

Aizawa sucks in a sharp breath. "Hitoshi, it's—" *complicated*, he doesn't say. "It's not my call to make."

"But would you fight for her? If she came back, if she wanted to?" *I'm on your side*. "Would you fight for her the way you've fought for me?"

Aizawa looks at him, long and hard, jaw set. "I would now."

Hitoshi looks and looks and *looks* for the tell, for the lie, and finds nothing. He wants to believe him.

"Come back to UA," Aizawa says. "Help me make it the kind of place you would be proud to represent, the kind of place that would do right by you, and Hagakure, and all the future students out there like you. Or don't, because you don't owe us anything. But promise me that you're making that choice on your own terms, because it's what *you* want to do."

Hitoshi wants to believe him. To believe that it can be that easy, to believe that he's not alone. That no matter how far he's fallen, someone is still fighting to pull him back. Someone is still willing to reach beyond the shadow he casts to drag him into the light. Someone

is willing to try.

Hitoshi wants *so desperately* to believe him.

He does.

Chapter End Notes

It's always a hoot to post chapters like this one. That last scene with Hitoshi & Aizawa is one I have truly been thinking of since the year of our lord 2017. Crazy to see it no longer languishing in my drafts!!! They grow up so fast!

Next chapter is undergoing some minor structural adjustments so it may be a bit longer before I feel comfortable relinquishing it to the wild.

In the meantime, as always, your kudos & comments fill me with unfathomable joy.

Peace out for now :)

Seen

Chapter Notes

TW: flashback, disassociation.

A frank discussion is had about self-harm (no urge to self-harm is expressed, no self-harm takes place on or off screen.)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

February comes with a record-breaking snowfall that coats the Musutafu downtown core in a heavy blanket of white, rendering the sidewalks hazardous and the streets downright deadly.

1-A braves the cold with their first outdoor training since before winter break, which rapidly devolves into an icy obstacle course courtesy of Todoroki, then further devolves into a snowball fight the likes of which Shouta can deem nothing short of lethal. He's forced to cut the fight short after a bad slip results in a mouthful of blood and a needle-in-a-haystack hunt for Sato's missing tooth, but he still considers it a resounding success. It's the most he's seen 1-A smile in weeks.

Their good humour is tempered only by an empty space - the obvious imbalance where his class roster used to split evenly down the middle, and where it's yet to be filled by another.

His offer to Hitoshi has no expiration date. He made that clear. Hitoshi still needs time to heal, and UA itself to come up with a plan for easing him into his return. Hitoshi hadn't said yes, *explicitly*, but he hadn't said no either, and for now, Shouta will have to learn to live with that.

He's learning to live with a lot of things. His anger, these days, is a constant fire - a low, simmering heat that threatens to flare up at every wayward gust of wind. An overheard snippet of gossip at the 1-B lunch table. A diatribe of Hitoshi on the evening news. A paparazzi shot of him leaving the hospital after a routine check-up, eyes red, mouth thinned in pain. It smothers reason and logic, uses them as fuel and combustion. It makes him *hate* - a foreign, reckless emotion, unbridled. Hate *who*?

Shigaraki, the fire crackles. *Hagakure*, it spits, in the same breath.

Part of him thinks she deserves it. To be hated, to be exiled. How couldn't she, after everything? The lies, the betrayal, the purposeful endangering of her friends' lives? It's a poisonous mindset, but helplessly addictive, and Shouta struggles to resist it. For Hitoshi's sake. For the promise Shouta made him.

The hate is a defense mechanism, he knows - an instinctive reaction against the guilt of having been a cog in the machine that failed Hagakure, both in childhood and more recently, when he sacrificed her to the League.

It was easier, when they were faceless - a mass of villains, all but a few unnamed, acting as one. A singular evil.

But Hitoshi's words have painted them in colour, cast light on the sharp angles and shadowed corners. Orphans and convicts, the impoverished and the hurt. A young man littered in scars. A girl who can't be any older than Hitoshi. A leader with a soft spot for family. All of them have done terrible things, or stood by and watched them happen, and Shouta can't bring himself to forgive them, nor does he suspect most of them even want his forgiveness in the first place, but at the very least, he thinks, he can extinguish the hate. He can *try*.

The week rolls over without further incident, and Friday finds Shouta stepping out from class early. It's the day of Hitoshi's scheduled interview with Chanel 54, and Shouta has been instructed to accompany Hitoshi and Haru on the long, tense drive to the Tokyo studio.

They arrive mid-afternoon and check into a private hotel, where Tsukauchi and Nedzu meet them to go over their final preparations. It's a blur of potential questions and well-rehearsed answers, before Hitoshi emerges from his room dressed in what Nedzu has deemed *professionally modest* attire, and they finally head to the studio.

The security in the news studio has clearly been heightened for their arrival, despite the fact that no one outside a small circle of producers and cameramen are supposed to know they're here. Shouta maps each exit and eyes each steely-faced guard as though daring them to break character.

The host greets them with far more enthusiasm. She oozes confidence - all nude lipstick and beige heels. She introduces herself as Mitsuko, and greets them all by name, including Tsukauchi, and all traces of disarming girlishness vanish. She's done her research.

The set is intimate, almost like a therapist's office. The film lights are bright but flattering, the floor waxed hardwood, the furniture soft with velvet accents. Hitoshi is instructed to sit in a plush armchair, and Mitsuko sits across from him in an identical one, legs crossed and leaning forward attentively. Hitoshi fidgets only once before his hands fold in his lap. He sits perfectly straight - polite, if wary. The lights bring a hint of warmth to his cheeks, his eyes dark-ringed but focused. He looks- not comfortable, maybe, but controlled.

His neck, on the other hand, is a nightmare.

It *looks* like it hurts - every turn of his head has the skin pulled taut, gleaming white with fresh scar tissue. When he relaxes it fades back to a pinkish colour, raised and rippled like a burn, which may fade over time and may not.

Most notably, it looks exactly like the imprint of the hand that caused it.

Even Shouta's encounter with Shigaraki wasn't that bad - and it hurt like a *motherfucker*. But he had Recovery Girl on him within the hour, and the scar on his elbow is now nothing more than a spot of rough flesh. He had been far more worried about his eyes, after getting curb stomped into the concrete at USJ. His eyes are his job security and lifeblood, after all - his quirk is useless without them.

Hitoshi's wound, by contrast, focuses right on his vocal cords, the very source of his power. Like Haru said - Shigaraki made a conscious effort to leave him alive, but in all likelihood, had been aiming to leave him voiceless.

"Shinsou," Mitsuko says warmly. "Thank you so much for sitting down to speak with me tonight."

"Thank you for having me."

Shouts and the others are clustered to the side of the set, off-camera and tucked from view behind a bank of monitors and mics. There's a sound operator frowning over some equipment to their right, a beady-eyed executive to their left, and supervisor in front of them, all flashing a flurry of silent cues to the host.

Hitoshi can't see them from where he's sitting, and Shouta wouldn't be able to see him either if not for a nearby monitor that depicts an unwavering close-up of his face. This is the version of him that will be seen by the entire world when the interview goes live. Shouta

swallows his unease and watches it intently.

"We have a lot to cover, but I really want you to take your time, so you don't feel rushed. Feel free to speak at whatever pace you'd like, and let me know if you ever want to change subjects or even need a break, okay?" says Mitsuko.

"I will, thank you."

Mitsuko glances over Hitoshi's shoulder, and gets a thumbs up from the supervisor. She smoothes her dress and flicks a piece of hair over her shoulder while the room descends into silence and the cameras start rolling.

"Let's start from the beginning," Mitsuko intones. "Most people want to know about the moment you joined the League of Villains, but I'd like to go back even further, to when you first applied to be a student at UA. Tell me what that was like."

Hitoshi smiles, and settles into his skin. "I had always dreamed of being a hero," he begins.

Hitoshi crafts a story. He tells her of his struggles in middle school, lacking friends, being outcast for his quirk. How he applied to UA in spite of it - a challenge to the status quo, to himself. He talks about the entrance exam, the bittersweet victory of being granted admission to the General Education stream.

"Is that why you participated in the Sports Festival? As an opportunity to get your foot in the door of the Hero stream?"

Mitsuko matches him beat for beat, laying the foundations of a story Shouta's certain she already knows like the back of her hand. They play off each other for a few minutes - easy questions with easy answers, establishing rapport. Shouta's eyes bounce between the monitors.

Hitoshi doesn't exactly appear at ease, but he knows what's expected of him, and he plays along perfectly - wistful smiles at old memories, twinges of sorrow at the more painful ones.

"It was in your second semester at UA that you became aware of the presence of a traitor within the school?"

"That's right," Hitoshi nods. "I was approached by Principal Nedzu in early September. He explained the situation as best he was able, and asked for my help in drawing out the traitor."

"How did he plan to do this?"

"He wanted me to make myself appear... like-minded. He wanted me to play into the stereotypes of villainy already assigned to me by my quirk."

Mitsuko hums, and her voice softens to one of introspection. "What did you think, when you heard that?"

A hesitation - the first Hitoshi's given so far. "I thought about how lucky I was."

Mitsuko tilts her head. "Can you elaborate?"

"It's rare for people like me to be shown so much trust by Heroes. To be given a chance like that. Even though it was predicated on the fact that people generally view me poorly, for once, I didn't care. I remember thinking I had a chance to do something good. I remember thinking it was going to change my life." He shakes his head. "I had no idea what I was getting myself into."

Hitoshi goes on to give the redacted version of the mission - the first few weeks, the misbehaviour, the secret training, the isolation that permeated every second of it. The path to hell, each brick laid with care - honest, without being detailed. He doesn't direct any blame toward Nedzu or Aizawa or even UA as a whole. He bears the weight, the burden of every step. *I made the choice. I was happy to do it.*

As Hitoshi speaks, unease creeps along Shouta's spine. He frowns, studying the monitor for the source of it. It takes his mind a moment to catch up with what his body is telling him - the subtle warning bells ringing, the deep-seated sense of *wrong*. There's something off, something different about Hitoshi's voice.

His pitch is lower, Shouta realizes. By an octave or so, at least. The effect is stark, now that he's noticed it. Hitoshi's words come rough, throat tight as though strangling against him, all of it serving to emphasize his rasp, and the obvious source of it burned into his skin.

It's a good idea. It's a *great* idea. Hell, Nedzu had said it, on more than one occasion. They need to draw sympathy, to make Hitoshi look more vulnerable, more hurt.

Shouta can't help but wonder whether Hitoshi's even doing this current trick consciously. Even knowing him as well as he does, Shouta can't tell.

He'll give a hint of a smile and it's all youthful humility, then he'll pause between words to reveal that split-second, thousand-yard stare, and the audience can't help but wonder at the *depth* of him, at what he sees when his gaze goes far away like that.

It's so deeply ingrained in him - the acting. Shouta wonders when it happened, if it had already begun all those months ago under his tutelage, or whether it was developed purely as a survival mechanism while within the League. Could a change like that have happened right beneath his gaze? Were there signs of it then, signs he missed?

He missed them in Hagakure.

"So, in the end, you were completely isolated when the mission was cut short. You felt angry, and discarded, and were offered no recourse, no outlet. And when the League presented an opening to you, you took it."

Hitoshi doesn't waver, doesn't so much as blink. He tilts his chin up haughtily, as though to meet the fall of a gavel. "I did."

The host leans in, and the entire world crowds close with her. "Why?"

Why?

A question with such impossible weight behind it.

If ever there were a single moment to alter his fate, to completely rewrite his story, this would be it. A river split wide, branching possibilities that stretch ever onward. The easiest of them all - the truth. And Hitoshi can't say he's not tempted.

He has his voice back, and a platform from which millions of people will hear it. Here, he could explain it all away, shake off all the

judgement and suspicion and fear that his quirk has ever wrought upon him. Here, he could say, *I did it to save All Might*, or, *I did it to find the traitor*, or, *I did it to be a hero*. Here, the ruse could end. He could plant his feet and stand proud, could tell the world that they were wrong about him.

He can't say he's not tempted.

"I was hurt, and I wanted to hurt those who had put me in that position back," he says, and the lie feels so seamless, all velvet and wine. Like a confession ought to. Like the *truth* ought to. "The League offered me that chance - offered me recognition, compassion. A declaration of sympathy."

"What was that moment like?"

"Exhilarating. Terrifying." He laughs a little, self-deprecating. "Make no mistake, I *was* terrified of them. Even before they—" And here, a practiced stutter. He raises a hand to his neck, as if self-consciously, then cuts off in an aborted movement, jolting back down to his lap. "Even before our falling out."

Make it clear how you were injured, and traumatized by it, Nedzu had instructed. *This will be your biggest saving grace - we cannot let the audience at any point forget that the League radicalized and later brutalized a child.*

Mitsuko nods, eyes creased in imagined pain as she drinks in the performance. "But initially, they welcomed you with open arms?"

"They did, initially," he says. "They said all the right things - that I had potential, and that they wanted to nurture it. That I didn't deserve to be treated the way I had been by the heroes."

"Would you say that the League presented the opportunity to fulfill roles that had been neglected in your own life? Roles like that of a friend? A father-figure, perhaps?"

Hitoshi's lips part, soundless. A brief memory, one of the few he has of his dad - a blurred figure at his side, a crooked smile. *Whatcha' got there, kiddo? Did you draw that at school?* He doesn't remember what the drawing was, only his pride in it. Dad was an artist too.

"No questions about his father," comes Nedzu's voice from somewhere far away.

“Of course, my apologies.” Mitsuko's smile is all honey.

“They were my friends, yes,” Hitoshi recovers haltingly. “There was— It did feel paternal, sometimes. With some of them. With one of them in particular. And I... feel sorry for them, that their only sense of community and family is rooted in pain, and hatred, and cruelty.”

Mitsuko purses her lips. “Cruelty expressed by them or toward them?”

He thinks on this, settles with, “Both. The League is... not what I thought they were.”

Her eyes sharpen at the springboard, a shark on blood. “What *did* you think they were? Because you joined them, after all; you clearly saw, at least for a time, an inherent value in their existence.”

Hitoshi nods. He was ready for this shift - the moment when the smiling hostess drops and the investigative journalist beneath rears her head. Here, he must be especially careful.

It's a delicate needle he threads, and it's going to spark intense debate regardless, in the way that discussions of ethics and law so often do. But he's glad the conversation has moved in this direction without too much obvious prompting on his part - the first step in separating the League as *people* from the League as a social phenomenon, their actions from what they represent.

“I thought they were like me,” he begins. “They're not especially different, or unique. They're incredibly powerful and incredibly dangerous, yes - but so are most Pro heroes. The difference is that villains lack state-sanction approval to use those powers to fight back against their perceived injustices.”

Mitsuko's eyes narrow, but her posture is eager, open and keen - that of a debater, not yet a critic. “One can easily argue that there are greater differences than that. Their goals, for one, are often very different from those of heroes.”

“You're right. Maybe I'm simplifying things,” he concedes. “As I said, they *are* dangerous. But their quirks are not the biggest threat to our society. Their *appeal* is. And the reason that they are so appealing is not because of their methods, but their message.”

“A message that you very publicly helped amplify,” she counters, just shy of accusing.

"I did, because I believed in it. Just like many others do. Far more than our lawmakers would like to admit," Hitoshi says, and allows a beat of silence for the implications to set in. He ponders the floor, expression thoughtful and visibly projecting the care with which he chooses his next words.

"There are always going to be people that the ideals of the League appeal to. Disenfranchised people, usually. Unhappy people, resentful people, hurt people. The League is counting on it. They target those people specifically because of their isolation, which is something we help perpetuate through quirk discrimination, and a refusal to see the corruption that plainly exists in our society." Greed, and nepotism, and abuse. A world blinded to it, because it's so much easier to pretend their heroes are perfect, and inscrutable, and good.

"These are genuine grievances that need to be addressed, and so long as we keep ignoring them, then the amount of unhappy, resentful, hurt people is only going to grow."

He glances around - the overhead lights, the captivated silence of the crew, the depthless black glare of the camera lens. The production of it all, the careful curation of his image and voice. "People didn't care about the League as individuals until they were palatable. That's what they wanted from me; that was the goal of their social campaign. They want people to ask them questions like the questions you're asking me. They want to be heard. They want to be seen."

Mitsuko seems to like this - a smile plays at the corner of her mouth. Her eyes flicker over his shoulder toward some unseen executive, then back to his, alight. "Is that why you're doing this interview now? To counteract the damage you did for the League in spreading their message?"

"I'm doing this interview because I want people to know that I understand what it's like to be hurt by hero society." Here, most dangerous of all, he turns his focus away from Mitsuko, and fixes it properly on the camera, feeling the weight of the invisible stare behind it. *A declaration of sympathy.*

"I understand your pain. But joining the League of Villains is not the answer. They will try to convince you that it is - that you have no other option, that you will never be welcomed back, that you're in too deep, but that's not true. I am sitting here today as proof of that. There are better ways to enact change - we just have to be brave enough to try, and fail, and try again, so that others can learn from

us."

He stops just short of saying her name. His eyes burn. *I see you*, he cannot say.

If Mitsuko's taken aback by the sudden change in atmosphere, she covers it well. Her eyes make another pass over her team, silent cues racing between them, before she nods once and readjusts. "Thank you, Shinsou, for your insights. Very powerful." She makes a gesture toward the camera. "I think there are lots of people who will benefit from hearing those words."

"Thank you." He holds the lens one second more - a net cast wide, a prayer that it catches the person who needs it most. *I see you*.

I will not let you stand here alone.

The conversation recovers smoothly from there thanks to Mitsuko's easy delivery, a natural, casual progression that might, any other time, lull him into a sense of security. True to her word, she lets him take his time, allowing the story to flow through in moments of devastating clarity and even, at times, light-hearted banter. She's clearly knowledgeable on the timeline of events and thorough in her probing, keen to capture his perspective on every aspect of it.

A few well-placed objections from Nedzu steer them around the delicate subject of Eri's mistreatment and Hitoshi's alleged change of heart - that first, heart-pounding moment of betrayal, when he left the note behind for Aizawa at Shihori Park. They mention the subsequent Pro raid on the Eights Precept base only briefly, focusing more on the League's reaction to the dismantling of their fellow villains.

"They were afraid," Hitoshi explains. "They didn't want to be caught up in the fallout."

"Was there any suspicion of your involvement in the matter?"

"No," he says. "That didn't come until later."

They discuss the move to Saitama, then the attack on Golden Heights, then finally, his failed escape attempt.

He describes those final days with the League, their mounting anger and distrust, and eventually, at the catalyst of it all, the torture. Nedzu has asked him to go into detail here, to paint clear the image of brutality and the pain it inflicted, and so, feeling one step outside of himself, Hitoshi does.

He speaks to life the sensation of bleeding feet and bloodless arms, and the memories melt around him - slick tile underfoot, the metal cuffs digging into the skin of his wrists. The shriek of tinnitus, the roar of fear, the hopeless desperation.

He picks a point somewhere over Mitsuko's shoulder, a smudge of darkness blurred by the halo of ring lights, and lets the memory unfold. Shigaraki, all narrow, bony shoulders and too long limbs, that crimson gaze that seemed to seep from the darkness.

In the memory, Shigaraki eyes him for a long time, strung up like a slab of meat. He circles like a predator, barely controlled fury, head tilted in consideration. He pauses, and a finger tilts Hitoshi's chin up from below, pulling him from the edge of consciousness.

The finger drops, and Shigaraki's hand closes around his throat.

Hitoshi will never forget this moment.

The pain is excruciating, unbearable, beyond words or meaning or sense. The memory of it presses white hot behind his eyes, rendered in jolts of sickening clarity. He feels naked, flayed alive, a nerve exposed to a singular, eclipsing pain. He remembers the pressure, his own scream turned voiceless, the cold-hot spill of blood. He remembers shouting, and movement. Shigaraki's eyes like crystals, cold and clear and the last thing he saw before his vision blurred with black fog and the burning sensation around his neck suddenly dissipated.

He wavers, and is surprised by himself - the sound of his own trembling voice foreign to his ears. Time tilts forward in staggering jolts. The topic has suddenly changed. He feels his mouth moving, discussing his recovery, the ongoing investigation, the pressures of public scrutiny. Mitsuko asks questions and Hitoshi answers, mechanically, as though reading from a script, far away inside his own head. Some time later, he stands, exchanges bows with Mitsuko and the cameramen and a throng of producers without faces.

"Well done, Shinsou. You should be very proud," Nedzu says, somewhere.

There's a hand on his shoulder—mom's, he thinks—steering him off the set. He blinks and they're in the car, the neon glow of the Tokyo cityscape muted behind tinted windows, sliding by rapidly, like time doesn't seem to stop being able to. The car is silent but for the unforgiving wheeze of the heater, cranked up all the way. Hitoshi's fingers curl in his lap, ice-cold despite it.

He's starting to come out of the daze by the time they pull into the hotel, but loses himself again as he rises from the car and the blood rushes from his head. His vision tunnels to a pinpoint. Someone slips an arm around his back, murmurs soft words that skip like stones over the watery surface of his thoughts.

It's a sharp smell that brings him out of it, finally.

Hitoshi's in a dim hotel room, sitting on the edge of a bed. Aizawa is crouched in front of him, his calloused hands cupping Hitoshi's frozen ones, holding them still around a styrofoam cup of lukewarm, slightly-floral smelling liquid. The steam curls around his nose and disperses across his cheeks.

"Chamomile," Aizawa says. "Got it?"

Hitoshi tightens his grip. Got it.

Aizawa releases him. Hitoshi sips the tea and Aizawa leans back on his heels, watching until he's confident that Hitoshi's not going to spill over himself. A padded chair has been pulled across the room. Aizawa retreats to it, only a few feet away. The blinds are shut - letting in only the hazy, smoggy glow of the city beyond. The room is otherwise empty.

"Where's mom?" Hitoshi croaks, and winces at the sound of his own voice. It's even worse than he was making it for the interview.

"She's with Detective Tsukauchi. They went to get you something to eat."

"Oh," he says. He doesn't feel very hungry. "What are you doing here?"

Aizawa makes a face. "Making sure you're okay."

"Oh," he says again. Then, much too long later, "I am."

"Yeah?" Aizawa says. "You with me?"

Hitoshi nods. Talking helps - forces his mind to be in the here-now. His throat is sore, but Aizawa must have guessed that much, because the tea helps that too. He takes another sip. "Did I fuck up the interview?"

"No. You were amazing, Hitoshi."

He wonders when the hell Aizawa started calling him that. *Hitoshi*, instead of Shinsou. "Is it weird that I don't remember? I feel like it happened years ago."

"The brain does strange things to protect itself under duress," Aizawa says. "It's not weird to forget."

"I remember the torture. Every second of it," he says stupidly, and mashes the cup to his lips to silence himself. What the hell is wrong with him? He nearly feels drunk.

Aizawa twitches. "I'm sorry."

Hitoshi shrugs, takes another sip. "Wasn't you."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Hitoshi hadn't considered this. He does now, carefully. "No. Maybe. Not yet."

"Okay."

"I thought he was going to kill me," he blurts. "I wanted him to, by the end."

Aizawa visibly fights for composure, fists straining around the arms of his chair. Hitoshi swallows a knot of guilt - he *just* said he didn't want to talk about it.

"Do you still want that?"

Another idea he hadn't considered - Aizawa's full of them, today. Hitoshi thinks, and this time manages an honest, "No."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, if you- if you feel anything like that. Any urges to hurt yourself. You went through something horrible, and your brain is working overtime to try to compensate. To try to heal. Sometimes the wires get crossed."

Hitoshi frowns into his tea. "I should probably see a therapist, huh?"

Aizawa *laughs*, cuts himself off with a cough. “I would strongly advise it.”

Hitoshi feels somewhat bolstered by the sound. He gives a smile that, for once, doesn’t feel like a mask, and downs the rest of his tea. Hell, maybe he is a little hungry, after all.

Chapter End Notes

can you believe that I'm not dead

In Limbo

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shouta's up with the brisk light of dawn the next morning, pilfering a lackluster breakfast from a small buffet in the hotel lobby. A few bleary-eyed kitchen staff stifle their yawns, barely finished setting up by the time he's stacked his first plate, then his second, then his third. Haru and Hitoshi are, after all, much too famous to make their own meals, these days.

He's forced to forfeit when it becomes obvious he can't balance three plates *and* two cups of coffee up several flights of stairs, and makes his getaway with a silent prayer that Haru's woken in a forgiving mood.

They plan to make an early departure this morning - out of Tokyo's downtown core and back to the relative safety of Musutafu. They still have some twelve hours before Chanel 54 airs Hitoshi's interview, but Shouta would rather have them back in familiar territory long before then.

Overall, he's feeling hopeful about yesterday's outcome - Hitoshi's brief dissociative episode notwithstanding. The kid gave a better show than any of them were expecting, except maybe Nedzu, who always seems to have a sixth sense for these sorts of things. Hitoshi was virtually perfect, exactly like he needed to be - likeable, vulnerable, and more importantly, *believable*.

Still, it's hardly half the battle. A bad edit can be deadly, and a quick way for a news outlet to cash in. He'd like to think Nedzu wouldn't have agreed to the interview if there was even a chance the network would try to spin it that way, but then, they've all made poor judgment calls before.

There's still plenty of work left, regardless. True to his word, Toshinori has agreed to help Hitoshi in whatever way he can, which for now amounts to a few scheduled TV appearances of his own. Once Hitoshi's interview goes live, and they have a better sense of the public's reaction, Toshinori will be there to step in, curbing backlash and soothing fervor with the wisdom of an older hero's perspective. Shouta's grateful for any help, even if Toshinori still privately begrudges him for this whole mess to begin with. Whatever ugly

feelings exist between them, Toshinori's nothing if not true to his word. They all have jobs to do.

Right now, Shouta's job amounts to delivering breakfast, sneaking his charges out of their room, and not crashing Haru's car on the drive home, a task he conducts with all the intensity and focus it deserves.

The atmosphere of their drive is subdued but not wholly unpleasant. The roads are quiet and clear - no suspicious cars or glaring camera lenses on their tail. The car is silent for long stretches, Hitoshi's gaze distant through the window, which is about as much as Shouta can hope for, things as they are.

Back in Musutafu, Shouta accompanies them past the security check in the lobby and all the way to the front door, pausing long enough to watch the lock unstick, but follows no further.

Haru tips her head in thanks and gives a silent wave goodbye. Hitoshi lingers in the door. He's better than to look expectant, but that doesn't stop Shouta from imagining it in the tight corners of his eyes. Fondness floods him, twitching up at the corners of his lips.

"You're leaving?"

"There's still work to do," he says regretfully.

Hitoshi gives a slight, indecipherable nod, ever the soldier, and Shouta acts without thinking, hand shooting out to grasp the kid's shoulder. For a moment, he's not really sure what to do with himself - he nearly pulls him in for a hug, but locks the elbow instead, turning the move into an aborted sort of pat.

They're in limbo now, he and Hitoshi - a strange sort of half-formed relationship. There's still no concrete agreement on when he'll be coming back to UA, and Shouta certainly isn't going to push the matter while he's still recovering. Until that moment comes, they're not really student and teacher anymore, though Shouta's not sure what that makes them instead.

He casts the thought aside, and summons that smile again, wonders if it conveys even a fraction of the depth.

"I'll see you around, okay?"

Hitoshi nods again, expressionless but for Shouta's imagined disappointment. "See you."

He shakes the lingering regret by taking to the sky, swinging from frost-slicked balconies and plummeting from highrise ledges, and lands on a rooftop across the street from Mustafu PD with goggles fogged and cheeks red.

The Police District is a squat, depressing government building on the best of days - none of the style or colour of a privately-funded *Hero's* headquarters - but in the gray, half-melted snow, it somehow looks even worse, as if it too has somehow been marred by the shitstorm of the past few months.

Shouta watches, awaiting a quiet moment before he descends from his perch. Uniformed figures swarm through the revolving glass doors, faces drawn and largely unfamiliar. Even more greet him inside, several with narrowed and lingering gazes. So much for an unnoticed entrance.

Another one of the downsides of his name being tied up in the “Shinsou Scandal” - increased recognition.

Tsukauchi, at least, seems to be making the most of it - graduated from a cubicle out front to a private office behind a fogged glass door.

“At least for the duration of the trial,” he explains, when Shouta raises an eyebrow at his new digs. “Figured it’d be better to keep everything locked up in one place then scattered around where anybody could sneak a look.”

“Sure,” Shouta says casually. “Is that a normal thing to be worried about these days?”

Tsukauchi juts his chin in the direction of the bullpen, voice low and deceptively casual, but not without a thin, rigid line of anger concealed beneath. “Lotta new guys out there.”

People he can’t trust, he means. People he never got the chance to use his quirk on.

Shouta hums. They never did find out the source of the PD’s leak, after all. “I see.”

The conversation moves on to the subject of Chisaki's trial, just a few weeks away now. Tsukauchi gives him the rundown. Prosecution and defense have both selected their representation, witnesses, and are in the process reviewing the evidence, a fact for which he doesn't look terribly pleased.

"It's all circumstantial, that's what I'm worried about. Our best bets are photos and witness accounts from the night of the rescue, plus medical details on Eri's trauma. We've dug up almost nothing on Chisaki himself. His record is *suspiciously* clean. Best we got is a minor juvie infraction, but his lawyer's already made it inadmissible."

Shouta straightens. If everything hinges on the statements surrounding Eri's rescue and injuries, then it'll all come down to him and Haru. Once again. He wonders if she'll see the same twisted humour in it as him. Saving a child from villains, as fast as they passed one off to them.

"What about Honda?" he asks. Yasujima Koitarou was an Eight Precepts member, and getting him to agree to talk was no easy feat. "Isn't he supposed to be the star witness in this all?"

Tsukauchi waves a hand in a *so-so* motion. "I mean, yeah, we're definitely going to use him too, but he was no high-ranking insider. The man talked a big game, but he knows about as much about the whole thing as we do. Turns out he was more of an errand boy."

Errand boy or not, Yasujima is risking his life for this, and according to Tsukauchi, has been in solitary since agreeing to testify. It was a primary condition of his confession. That, and a reduced sentence.

His guards have reported him pacing his cell at all hours and refusing most foods - paranoid, constantly demanding the guards check his cell for *what*, nobody knows. Traps? Bugs? Shouta can't blame him. There are a lot of people who would benefit from him not living long enough to take that stand in a few weeks.

"Oh, trust me, I'm aware," Tsukauchi says gravely. "We have him in maximum security. Once he moves to the courthouse jail, it'll be under a 24-hour watch, too. And I mean *my* guys. None of the newbies."

Shouta grimaces. "Why do I get the feeling this is going to end up way more complicated than it needs to be?"

"Yeah, speaking of which—" Tsukauchi breezes past the question

entirely, and rummages through a few overstuffed drawers before emerging with a planner. He uncaps a pen with his teeth, and mumbles around it, "When can we get Shinsou in here to prep his statement?"

Fuck's sake. *Of course* Hitoshi agreed to give a statement too. More time in the public eye, more scrutiny. Yeah, that's what he needs. "You seriously want him on the stands?"

"Kid's already agreed to it."

So much for *not pushing*. UA's a known entity - predictable, if not always controllable. More importantly, UA can *wait*. As long as it needs to, until Hitoshi's ready. *This* can't.

"Why?" Shouta fumbles for an excuse, comes up with, "He only met the guy once."

Tsukauchi gives him a funny look. "I dunno, maybe out of the goodness of his heart? Foreign concept for you, I know."

Shouta drags a hand down his face. His eyes ache from exhaustion - the constant hypervigilance by proxy, the balancing act, the careful consideration of every known variable and how they might affect Hitoshi. What's best for him, for his recovery, for his image, for *hers* - the one he refuses to stop cultivating for Hagakure. If she even wants it. If she even *knows*.

He can still feel the low, simmering burn of anger, at her betrayal and what it cost them. However much he tries to dismantle it, to self-analyze and self-correct, for Hitoshi's sake, it's still there, biding its time, sidled somewhere out of sight behind his brain. He allows himself the luxury of a scowl, but nothing else. Reminds himself, this is what Hitoshi wants.

"Fine," he says.

"Look, I'm not thrilled about this either," Tsukauchi sighs. "We might even have to get Eri on the stands, depending. She communicates well enough, yeah, sure, but what's it gonna do to her, having to relive all that? To say nothing of what the cross-examination will look like." He bites his tongue, huffs out a final, "I don't want to put either of them through this. But it's not like we have much of a choice."

Shouta glowers at nothing, aimlessly furious. Using kids as collateral, operating within a system *they built*, and somehow still powerless to

prevent it.

Not like we have much of a choice.

Shouta sags against his chair, righteousness draining away like water from a sieve.

Yeah. Some heroes they are.

An ugly evening gray has overtaken the sky by the time Shouta exits the precinct, and by the time he arrives at Saitama General, clouds threaten the horizon with something that might be rain or might be snow. Hard to tell, this time of year.

The staff at the rehab wing greet him with recognition, even at the unusual hour. Eri doesn't get many visitors.

She's in a private room, for her own safety and that of the other patients. Though the walls are plastered with her drawings, there's still a drab, sterile quality to the room that's impossible to ignore - a hospital cot with thin, threadbare covers, metal trays and white plastic cabinets containing the measly few possessions she owns.

Most of her days are spent in this room, give or take the occasional trip to the quirk specialist or social worker, or the even rarer meeting with prospective foster parents. Shouta's not privy to the details, obviously, but a frown and subtle shake of the head from the nurse tells him as much as he needs to know. No luck so far.

Eri greets him with excitement despite it all, the hopeful gleam of escape in her eye. Shouta normally fills his visiting hours on the playground outside, but the weather dispels his plans.

Eric doesn't pout, or throw a tantrum, or do any of the things a disappointed six-year-old should do. She nods wisely, as if this injustice is just one of many she has had to shoulder.

The nurse takes pity, offering a cracked plastic bucket with an assortment craft tools instead, a disappointment which Eri nonetheless accepts with a gratitude and maturity that blows most of 1-A out of the water. She sorts through the crumpled construction paper and

half-chewed crayons with perfect serenity, emerges with child's scissors, a sleeve of temporary tattoos, and a stare that begs no question.

Shouta dutifully presents his arm as a canvas.

Eri's hands are surprisingly deft, knotted with scars as they are. She selects a rainbow, traces a perfect cutout, and sticks it to Shouta's forearm, not far from the rough, rigid skin of his scar. A faint smile tugs at the corners of his lips. Like this, she somehow reminds of Haru - hands cool to the touch and perfectly professional, pressing firm, as though applying pressure to a wound. She repeats the process several times, decorating his skin in a vibrant assortment of butterflies and anime figures.

It's a little over half an hour before the nurse returns with a dinner tray for Eri, and Shouta bids his farewells. She startles him with a fierce hug on this way out, her tiny arms locked tight around his waist. Shouta makes eye contact with the nurse like it's a plea, but the woman only stifles a laugh. "Say goodbye, Eri," she instructs.

Eri muffles something against his jacket that definitely isn't goodbye.

Shouta dislodges himself, and crouches down to eye level. "What's that?"

Eri gnaws at her lip, hands twisting together now that they're no longer wrapped around him. "You'll come back, right?"

Shouta's throat swells up. "Yeah," he says thickly. "Yeah, of course."

"Okay."

"And we'll go on the playground again, next time," he adds.

"Okay," she repeats, more assured.

He longs to say more, but isn't sure what he could possibly offer. There's not much he can promise. Another day in this room, another meeting with the social worker, another few weeks before she'll be in a courtroom, every dark corner and flickering shadow of her trauma unpacked for a room of strangers to examine, a stenographer recording every word of the horror that brought her to this place.

"Have a good night," Shouta tells her, instead of all that.

He makes it out of the room without further incident, emotion tight in his chest, and has to pause in the hall just outside to catch his breath. He can still make out her tiny voice, muffled through the wall, followed by the nurse's soothing response. He has half a mind to turn back, when a buzz in his pocket cuts him short.

He checks his phone, blood running thin as Haru's name flashes across the screen. She only calls for two things - emergencies, or Hitoshi.

Shouta curses, finds the nearest set of doors and plows into the frigid evening beyond, throwing the phone against his ear.

"What do we think?" are her first words.

Shouta's already got his weapon in hand, scanning the building's walls for the fastest route up, but pauses enough to process the question. "Think about what?"

"The interview."

Shouta pulls back the phone and checks the time, heart thunderous. 6:32pm. The story was booked for a 30-minute slot.

"Shit." He hastily tosses his weapon back around his neck and rolls down his sleeves. He doesn't mention the temporary tattoos already flaking off. "Sorry, I'm at work. I didn't catch it." And then, jaw clenched around the words, he forces out, "How was it?"

There's a long, horrible pause, before she sighs. "Nedzu was right. The medical evidence *is* compelling." She doesn't sound happy about it.

Nedzu had recommended they grant full access to Hitoshi's hospital intake photos - the ones from those first few uncertain hours. Haru hadn't gotten to see Hitoshi until after he was out of surgery, but Shouta remembers before. Hitoshi's neck flayed open, skin decayed to reveal the pink of exposed muscle, the yellow of fat, the red red *red* of blood. He remembers the *scent* of it, copper and iron, the way it slipped through his fingers as he tried desperately to stem it. The *heat*, the way it melted rivulets in the snow while they waited for the ambulance.

He shakes his head. Hard. "How much did they show?"

"All of it. Everything we gave them." A sniffle, then, followed by another shaky breath. "Those pictures are going to follow him for the rest of his life, Aizawa. He'll never— That's never going to go away."

"I know," he says, weary but heartfelt.

She starts to say something else, then cuts herself off. He can picture her shifting the phone from one ear to the other, the thrum of unease beneath her skin.

"Haru?" he prompts.

"Am I- Is this okay? Are we doing the right thing?"

Shouta rocks back on his heels, a sudden gust of wintery air stealing his breath. What an impossible question. Nothing about this is even nearing *okay*. He stares up at the darkening sky, feels something lodge in his throat, too big to speak around, too impossible not to.

"You're a good mom. Cut yourself some slack. He didn't exactly make this easy on you."

Haru gives an unhappy hum. "We didn't exactly make this easy on him."

"No, we didn't," he admits. "But he's making the best of it. Let's meet him halfway, okay?"

It feels like a lifetime ago he stood in her office, not far from where he stands now - Hitoshi's defection still a raw wound, its sincerity still a question. Shouta had doubted him then, and paid for it dearly. He doesn't mean to make the same mistake twice.

"This is what he wanted. What he asked for. We have to trust him."

To be seen as a villain, to be scrutinized from every angle. To be haunted by a past mired in lies and mistakes not his own. This was the price Hitoshi was willing to pay, to save Eri, to save UA. To save Hagakure.

"Take care of him," he says softly.

"Of course."

"And take care of yourself too, Haru," he adds. "Please."

There's a pause. He can picture this one too - the shift of the phone, the faint hint of a smile. "Yeah," she says at length. "Yeah, I'll try."

He makes it home in time for the 7 o'clock re-run. He sees the interview - Mitsuko's easy charm, Hitoshi's more subdued demeanor, slowly morphing to hard questions and impassioned pleas. The editing is tight, the research thorough, the scrolling banners largely neutral. The distance of the screen does little to muffle the sincerity of the performance, nor to lessen the shock when the screen invariably cuts away to the photos.

Shouta looks at each with practiced detachment and thinks, *Compelling*. Yeah. That's one word for it.

He mentally checks out as soon as the interview ends, cutting away to newsroom tables and talking heads, the so-called *experts*, eager to dismantle the interview into its bare essentials - the catchy quotes and flashy revelations.

He thinks about checking his phone, but holds back. His students, wherever they are, are sure to catch the recap on social media tomorrow - Hitoshi's words twisted through the lenses of a dozen different news outlets.

He wonders what they'll think if--when--Hitoshi eventually returns to 1-A. If they'll be open to forming their own interpretations, or stuck in whatever mindsets they've already adopted, the discourse and drama they've internalized from whatever chatrooms and forums they visit these days.

He wonders if somewhere out there, Hagakure is checking those same chatrooms, echoing those same sentiments. He wonders if she has any idea what Hitoshi's done for her, what he's risked, what he's given. How willing he is to make himself bleed, so that everyone else can see how deep the damage runs.

The screen changes to a clip of Toshinori, sitting tall among a panel of news anchors, his usual grin sobered.

"Shinsou's resilience is remarkable, of course. But what's more remarkable to me is the message he carries," Toshinori says. "Shinsou has shown us that everyone is worthy of being given a second chance. Forgiveness is something that must be earned, but everyone deserves the chance to try to earn it, to try to change."

Shouta pulls his gaze from the screen, and casts it to the window, to the darkening winter storm beyond. With no face to imagine, he

mouths the shape of her name instead, like a silent prayer. *I hope you're out there*, he tells her. *I hope you're listening. I hope you know how much he's sacrificed to bring you home.*

Chapter End Notes

Wow, hi everybody! I wanna start by thanking everyone for their patience. If you're still here - hey, you're a real one, and I appreciate you.

I'm very happy to announce that this fic now has an official chapter count. That's right, after fuck knows how many years, this silly little writing project of mine that got way (way way) out of hand is finally complete! I will endeavour to post the remaining chapters on a weekly / bi-weekly basis.

Thanks again to everyone for their support. In my darkest hours of worrying that I would never finish this monster of a fic, the wonderful positivity and love from the comments section meant more to me than I can express in this author's note.

I hope you guys stick around for the next few chapters and enjoy the end to this crazy ride!

Emerging

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The interview airs on Saturday night at 6 o'clock.

Hitoshi watches as much as he can stomach, averting his gaze only when the shot changes to his intake photos from Saitama General - the sterile gray of the operating table, the gloved hands of the doctors, the skin of his throat, gaping and decayed. *Fuck*. Nedzu was right. Medical evidence is compelling.

The rest of the interview fairs better - the discussion with Mitsuko itself fluid and natural, even after he loses himself to the memory of the torture. It's odd to see himself like that - so deep inside his own head, and somehow still delivering his lines perfectly, as if following a script he doesn't remember memorizing. Even against his own critique, his performance is *good*, thanks in no small part to Mitsuko's easy chemistry and the flattering work of the editors, who really do seem to want to spin the narrative in a positive direction.

It's as good of an outcome as they could have hoped for. Better, even.

Yet when reaches for his phone, his palms are damp. His heart hammers in his throat, the swell of nausea not far below. His thumb hovers over his social media icons.

In the end, he doesn't work up the courage until the following day. A restless night has left him feeling little better, but with the interview behind him, and All Might's own news appearances sweeping the morning circuit, he finally takes the plunge.

The results are mixed. Some good, lots of bad. Mostly though, undecided. Certain segments of the interview have garnered more attention than others, notably his descriptions of the League and the torture. The analysis here is varied, the juxtaposition between their brutality and his assertion that they operated like a family. More than a few people declare themselves fit to diagnose him with Stockholm Syndrome, but he sees other labels thrown around too - he's also, apparently, a pathological liar, delusional, and suffering from PTSD.

The discourse is varied across apps and forums, age groups and political leanings - some corners of the internet engaged in thoughtful,

nuanced debate, while others are more critical, unyielding. There are questions, slander. Hell, there are *memes*.

He wades through it all, undeterred, eyes narrowed in search of another name. It doesn't take him long.

Ok but is anyone going to talk about Hagakure Tooru? reads one comment below a *Tokyo Headliner* opinion piece. *We still don't know anything about her. What hasn't Shinsou/UA told us yet? From everything her mom has said, the warning signs were there for years. Just goes to show some people are natural born villains.*

There are a few other articles that pay mention to her as well, one even rightfully criticizing Hitoshi's return to safety at the cost of Hagakure's, but even with All Might throwing out words like *forgiveness* and *empathy* left and right, none quite seem ready to extend it her way.

Any mention of Hagakure is blotted out by the ugly shadow of her mother, cast long by her own social media rampage. Fukumen Asano's opinions of the Channel 54 interview hardly have to be guessed at. *Shinsou Hitoshi wasn't the only one forced to live among monsters*, declares her most recent comment, followed by, *@Channel54 when are you going to hear both sides of the story?*

Hitoshi doesn't know what he was expecting - that the whole world would have a change of heart, would suddenly be willing to look past the sensational headlines and their own outrage to see the young, mistreated girl beneath. Hell, that *she* would have a change of heart, wherever the fuck she is - that she'd hear his plea and come running.

He doesn't even know what that would look like. How she would find him, let alone what he would do once she did. His fantasies of that moment are varied, but always vague - some end with tears, others with battle, where he has to convince her of their righteous path between dodging invisible blows. He always cuts himself off before the thought gets too far, self-conscious of his own naivety. Of course it's not going to be that easy.

He feels a bit like that now, rubbing at his arms like he could scrub the image from his head. He sits on the edge of his bed, leg bouncing, phone face-down on the covers beside him, abandoned in the middle of another one of Fukumen's online tirades.

Mom is out - to the store, maybe. He doesn't know. She's been doing that a lot lately, giving him space, or as much as their apartment

permits. It's quiet, and Hitoshi's blood is thrumming with unease.

He cracks the window above his bed. Doesn't lift the blinds, but chips at the ice enough to let in a thin blast of cold air, and it feels, for a second, like the trach had - enough to keep him alive, enough to keep him breathing, but not enough to fill in lungs, not enough to soothe the hollow ache that's clawing up his throat.

He opens it further, even dares to part the blinds this time, peering out like an animal emerging from hibernation, wild-eyed and ravenous. The street below is quiet, but Hitoshi knows it's an illusion. Police barricades and parked cars at the corner of the block, paparazzi and pedestrians alike, who won't hesitate to pounce the second they catch a glimpse.

But every inch of his skin is crawling - itching with the need to do something, to *move*, to outrun the nauseating paralysis of fear and indecision.

He slips on his shoes without thought. A sweater, hood pulled up. He stuffs his phone in his pocket, earbuds in his ears. Pounding drums take over, beating like gunfire against the noose of his thoughts. He's out the door - in the hallway, on the fire escape. His feet meet the sidewalk.

He stands there for a second, breathing fast. Every sense on high alert, braced for attack. *Move*, his body screams. *Go*.

He does, stiffly at first, before a long-forgotten muscle memory takes over - an echo of a hundred mornings, cursing the ache, the cold, the thin air burning his lungs. Just like then, he puts his head down, pushes back against the pain. Just like then, repetition takes over - the beat beat beat of his shoes against the pavement. Step step step then *jump*, over a patch of ice. He steadies himself on the other side, and feels a grin pull at his lips, semi-hysterical. He has no idea where he's going.

He hits an open street - a glance at his back shows no onlookers. He turns up the music. He *runs*.

He finds a rhythm, lungs searing from the demanding pace. Sweat pools down the back of his neck. He races from shadow to shadow, dodging crowds, cutting between narrow streets, and no one so much as glances his way. He feels invincible, invisible.

God. He wonders where she is. If she's okay. If she's lonely. If she's

happy. Happier than him.

Nobody knows what Hagakure did for him. Nobody gets it, really—not even Aizawa—what she sacrificed, turning herself in for him. He wants so, so badly for her to know that *he* gets it. That he knows what it cost her to save him.

He wants to pretend that the next pair of footprints in the snow are hers, that she's waiting just around the corner, at the end of the street. That's she's following him in secret, like she did so long ago. That she'll catch up, and together they'll stand against the endless tide of criticism and hatred from her mother and the media and the League and all the people telling them that this is where they belong, that this is what they deserve. He wants to prove them wrong. He wants to pretend that they're heroes again.

Hitoshi finally slows, takes stock of his surroundings for the first time in minutes. It's a familiar street, one he's been carried to by instinct. Manicured and pristine, a towering gate up ahead, and just beyond, the gleaming chrome and silver lights. A blue and white banner, the colours of UA.

He staggers to a halt. Stands, heaving, on the sidewalk, and stares up at his victory, his misery, the biggest triumph of his life and his own personal glass ceiling.

He had expected it to look different, to *feel* different - alien and strange and not half the size it used to be. But despite everything, his heart still lurches at the sight, his stomach still swoops with excitement, with wonder and fear.

There was never a moment he felt like he belonged behind those gates, in those classrooms, shouldering that legacy. He was an honourable mention, an exile in all but name. He'd thought for so long, the problem was him, his quirk, his *natural inclinations*. It had never occurred to him that it might have been UA itself - that system, that legacy.

He told Nedzu there was no place for him in a school of heroes. And maybe there wasn't. Maybe there still isn't.

But maybe there *could* be. Maybe it could change, like Aizawa said, from the inside out, to become something he could represent, something he could be proud of. Maybe then.

Hitoshi races home so quickly it's as though his feet have hardly touched the ground. He's jittery with adrenaline and the addictive, exotic rush of a certainty he hasn't felt in weeks, in months. It isn't until he unlocks the door that he realizes something's wrong.

The air buzzes with alarm - a sharp, staticky tension. A sixth sense clicks on in the back of his head, and Hitoshi throws open the door.

Mom's voice, edged with panic. "-gone, just *gone*. I don't know--"

"Mom?" he calls.

The voice cuts off. She sweeps around the corner of the kitchen, eyes frantic, phone clutched in hand, and freezes at the sight of him. "Oh my god."

From the phone, a faint response. Mom ignores it. She barrels into him, throws her arms around his head and presses Hitoshi's sweaty face to her chest. "Oh my god," she says again. "Oh, thank god."

From this position, her phone is close enough to make out the voice on the other line. Aizawa. "-going on? Haru?"

"Mom," he says urgently, and pulls back.

She releases him, though keeps one hand clawed around his shoulder. The other presses the phone to her ear. "I'm sorry, he's fine- No, no, he's fine. He's right here. I'm sorry. He's right here."

Aizawa responds - something Hitoshi can't hear.

"No, it's okay," mom says. "I'm sorry, please go back to work. I'll- I'll text you later."

Urgency lances through him. "Wait!" he says, and makes an aborted grab for the phone. Mom relinquishes it, startled, and he presses it to his ear. "Aizawa?"

"Hitoshi?" comes the immediate response. "What's wrong?"

"I'm ready to come back to UA."

There's a long silence, broken only by a single, ragged breath from the other end of the phone.

Hitoshi chances a glance at mom. She's gone pale, but he can't tell if it's from his declaration or her panic.

"Okay," Aizawa says at length. "Consider it done."

"Okay," Hitoshi says, and then stupidly, "Thanks," followed by an equally stupid, "Bye."

He hangs up.

Mom's eyes flit above his head, settling on nothing. Her breath is very loud.

"Sorry," Hitoshi says, and hands her back the phone.

"No, no, you're fine." She finally releases his shoulder, moving stiffly to take the phone instead, but only to put it face down on the counter. She still won't quite look at him.

"Are you okay?"

"Mhm," she says tightly.

Hitoshi shuffles his feet. "I was just out for a run," he offers weakly.

"A run," she repeats, back still turned. "Okay. That's— That's okay." Hitoshi can't tell if she's trying to convince herself or him.

He draws in a breath and holds it there. Tries, "I thought you would be proud, doc."

Mom turns at last. Her eyes brim with unspoken emotion. She takes a sharp breath, swipes at her eyes, then clasps Hitoshi's face between her hands, and *looks* at him, so long and so hard it's as if she's trying to freeze the image. Hitoshi breathes in the scent of her, and feels the tangled knot of his heart loosen, warmed in the glow of her presence, her touch, her quirk like the soft prattle of rain against a window, quieting the thunder in his head.

"Of course I'm proud," she says. "Hitoshi, *of course* I'm proud."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for the warm welcome back!

This one's a bit of a shorter chapter to help transition towards the final arc of this fic. I know lots of you are eager to witness

Hitoshi's return to UA and I am just as eager to share it.

See you next time ;)

Someone Who Cares

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The next few days pass in a blur of anticipation, with mom and Aizawa calling back and forth at all hours to discuss preparations for Hitoshi's return to UA. He catches scraps of the conversations - everything from safety precautions and armed escorts to flagging grades and after-hours tutoring. Hitoshi knows they're texting too, the contents of which he can't begin to guess at, and tries not to.

He fills his days by running - an hour every morning and another after dusk, if he's feeling restless or the cravings are worse than usual. The morning runs help to shake the lingering effects of his sleeping pills, a heavy sort of fog that leaves him sleep-addled and numb. He forces himself out before sunrise, when the streets of Musutafu are barely waking, as early as he had back in September.

The evening runs are a little riskier, and have him doubling his pace and making split-second turns to avoid curious stares. More than once, he takes the long way home, and ends up meandering through parts of Saitama he's never seen before, though he gives the industrial yards a wide berth.

After only a few days, the stiffness abates, the fire in his limb settles to a manageable ache, his body remembering once more what it's like to be pushed to its limits. His mind quiets too, the razor-edge of his thoughts blunted, no longer turning in cannibalistic circles of self-loathing and doubt, disarmed by the sudden influx of foreign sights and sounds.

As he runs, his thoughts wander away from him, detached and oddly calm. Invariably, they find their way back to Hagakure.

Some days, he pretends she's there, watching him. He comes to a stop in random places - empty parks and convenience store parking lots, on the impossible chance that she might be. He catches his own reflection in darkened windows and thinks, will she see this? Will she know? Once, he's even tempted to speak out loud, to whisper her name, like it might summon her off the wind, but the heavy weight of his own cynicism keeps him quiet.

He refuses to let it. He breathes deep and slow, sealing himself with resolve, fills his lungs with the frigid wind and *holds* it, until it becomes something warmer. Steam curls from the exhale, betraying the shape of her name. Just in case.

When the long beat of silence passes, he's braced for it. He was right. No one's listening.

He turns and catches his reflection, dark eyes glinting as if to say, *Not yet.*

The Friday before Hitoshi's due back at UA, he and mom drive meet with Nedzu. They head out in the evening, the sky a dusky pink, street lights flickering on as mom pulls out of the parking lot. She's driving a car Hitoshi's never seen before - a rental with heavily tinted windows, one the paparazzi doesn't know about yet. Still, Hitoshi's fingers twitch in his lap on the drive over, eyes hard on the rearview mirror. It's just the two of them.

"Aizawa wanted to come," mom says, as if sensing the thought. "But he had patrol tonight."

Hitoshi frowns. "How do you know?"

"We talk."

"Yeah? What do you talk about?"

Her mouth is pulled in a half-smile. "You, mostly."

Hitoshi takes this information without reaction.

"Don't let that go to your head," she adds, teasing.

"Do you like him?" The words push past his lips, airborne before he can stop himself. The regret is equally swift.

Her jaw works. "What?"

Hitoshi casts his gaze out the window, badly concealing his sudden flush. "I dunno, just- You don't really talk to a lot of people."

She laughs, brittle. "I've been a little busy these past few months."

The conversation lulls after that, and Hitoshi doesn't chase it. Instead, the rearview catches his eye. A car has materialized from nowhere. He shrinks in his seat. It lingers at the next turn, but finally turns away.

He blows out a long sigh. The rental car isn't going to be enough. They really *do* need to move. He's seen mom's searching up apartment listings online, but between her dwindling savings and her time off work, it hasn't been fruitful.

None of this has been easy for her. She's been steadfast throughout it all, never doubting him, never breathing a word of complaint while he dug their family name into its grave. She'll never admit it, but she'll be better off once he's back at school, once a modicum of normalcy has finally settled over her life. Maybe she'll return to work when things die down. Selfishly, the thought sends an ache through him - a strange, twisted sort of grief, like the closing of a chapter.

They turn the final corner towards UA. There are people on the sidewalk, just outside the main gate. A flustered-looking UA security guard corrals two figures back - a man and a woman, the latter of whom is gesturing emphatically, clearly upset.

Hitoshi's heart lurches as mom slows the car, a soft, "You're okay, Toshi," the only sign she's even seen them. She pulls off to the side of the street, but makes no move to get out.

In the silence, the woman's voice is audible.

"--mother of a former student, I have *every* right to an audience with him," she shrieks at the security guard. "I know my rights. I have a *lawyer*."

Hitoshi tears off his seatbelt and shoves the door open. Mom speaks, but it's lost in the roar of his pulse, the thunderous, furious storm that sings through him like lightning. He knows that voice.

He's across the street in seconds, rage seething from between his teeth. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Fukumen starts, heels clacking as she whirls around. "E-Excuse me, who—" she cuts off, eyes wide at the sight of him. Her mouth flaps open and closed, caught in indecision and fear. *Good*. She'd better be fucking terrified of him.

“What, nothing to say?” he spits, teeth bared. “Didn’t have that problem with the online, did you?”

"Hitoshi!" Mom's voice, behind.

"Alright, back off, kid." The other figure, the man - some sort of bodyguard. He throws an arm between them but Hitoshi dodges the swipe. The maneuver puts him right in Fukumen’s face - nearly chest to chest.

She cowers, shrieking. “This is assault!”

The bodyguard grabs him, but Hitoshi doesn’t care. He holds his ground, the words pouring out. "You should be ashamed of yourself. The way you talk about her? What kind of mother does that?"

Fukumen sputters. "What– Who the hell do you think you are?"

"Someone who actually gives a shit about her. Someone who cares."

Her mouth is a sneer, her eyes nothing but *hate* . "You have *no idea* what she was like."

Hitoshi snaps, thoughtless with rage, detangles himself from the bodyguard and *lunges* . The man snags him by the back of his collar. The pressure cuts against his airway, sends alarm bells screaming in his head - the memory of a hand around his throat. He sucks down a furious breath and feels his chest swell with power, tongue coated with power and coiled to strike.

He never gets the chance.

The bodyguard releases him. Fukumen sways in place. Hitoshi’s breath goes out, wordless.

For a long moment, nobody moves. Hitoshi blinks, uncomprehending, at the dizzying spell of silence has fallen over him. Fukumen gazes back, equally dazed.

A hand slips around his elbow. He thinks *mom* , and little else.

She steers him away without a fight, rounds the security booth to the plexiglass window, where she nods at the wide-eyed guard within. Her voice is a cold, rigid line. “Nedzu’s expecting us.”

The guard nods, nervous eyes darting to where Fukumen and her bodyguard still stand, faces eerily blank, no more than a few feet

away. He punches something into the booth's controls, and a moment later, the gate unlatches. Mom drags him through, leaving Fukumen and the metallic, poisonous taste of anger decaying in their wake.

They're hallways across campus before he registers Mom's *shaking*. A faint, stiff tremble, down to the arm clenched like a lifeline around his. A stab of worry works its way past the fog of calm.

Holy shit. He feels *calm*.

Hitoshi's brows pull together, stunned as the numbness slowly leaks from his skull.

Mom's shoulders still quake, but her face is etched in stone, jaw set, mouth an unhappy slant. At the sight, something cracks open inside of him. The numbness withers, leaving an embarrassment drowned only by awe. He never knew she could do that.

They continue towards the main pavilion, Hitoshi moving under his own power now, as his mind catches up to him. He stares at his feet, horrified. He attacked Fukumen. He almost used his quirk on her. It's the biggest thought in his head, the one he can't push away. He could feel it there, power burning like poison on his tongue, mixed with the addictive poison of rage.

He pulls several fast breaths, waiting for a reprimand that doesn't come.

Instead, mom says, "Are you okay?"

The anger has washed through him like a riptide, but the shame drags like mud at his feet. "I think so," he lies.

Impossibly, mom's iron grip tightens. The trembling has stopped, but pale and winded, nearly leaning on him now.

"Mom," he says softly. "What the hell?"

She sucks in a stuttering breath. "I'm sorry I did that to you."

"No, don't be," he insists. It plays back through his mind, the memory of her quirk like water to a flame, snuffing his fury. He shakes his head in amazement. "Did you always know you could do that?"

She pauses. "Yes."

Hitoshi's confusion morphs to awe. For a moment, childish glee swirls

in his chest, mind spinning with possibilities, like it used to when he imagined being a hero. A power like *that*.

He can't help but ask, "Did you ever think you could use your quirk to help people?"

Mom slows, something flickering in her face. Her tense grip releases at last, and she smooths herself slowly, shoulders squared. But she keeps a gentle hand in his. "I do help people. That's why I'm a doctor. My quirk has nothing to do with it."

Inside his office, Nedzu looks faintly flustered, but he sweeps himself together with all the gravitas as usual and invites them to sit. "I was just informed that you crossed paths with Ms. Fukumen. I must apologize. Her arrival was unannounced."

"I'm surprised she didn't bring a news crew with her," mom says, and Hitoshi and Nedzu freeze in tandem. Her tone is lighthearted, nearly joking. It's by far the friendliest she's ever spoken to him.

"She's welcome to try," Nedzu says gravely, before a smile creeps into the corner of his mouth. "I'm sure our legal team would be happy to draft yet another cease and desist."

Hitoshi lets the rest of their conversation wash over him, the rushed, last-minute details of his plan and the verbiage with which Nedzu disguises them. Something about a press release, about "framing his return as the triumph it deserves to be." He lets it fade to background noise - something oddly rote in all this now. He leans back in his chair, from which the shuttered blinds and gleaming artificial lights and enormous desk and colour-coordinated pens all peer down at him, as perfect and austere as they were back in September. He gazes back evenly, possessing none of the nervousness he did then - slouched in his chair instead of ramrod straight and eager to please.

He eyes the door, the corner of the room where Aizawa had stood, then a stranger.

"As a precaution, all UA staff have been made aware of Shinsou's true situation, and I'm confident they'll offer support however they can during his reintegration," Nedzu says. "The students, however, may

prove more challenging, seeing as they have likely formed their opinions based solely on the information made available to the public.

“I lived with the League of Villains,” Hitoshi reminds him. “I’ll be fine.”

Nedzu inclines his head, wearing a cryptic expression that Hitoshi doesn’t bother to decode. “Of course. Which does, in fact, bring me to the final item on our list today. As I’m sure you know, the students of 1-A reside on-campus in dormitories. Now, I’m not advocating for a decision to be made at this precise moment. I only wish to let you know that, should you desire it, there is a place there for you as well, Shinsou.”

A shadow passes over mom’s face, but that’s all. Hitoshi doesn’t have the courage to guess what she’s thinking. Deep down, he knows, it *would* be better for her, with him gone. Quieter. Safer.

But watching her now, from the corner of his eye, he’s suddenly not so sure. All these weeks, she’s been wound so tightly, every part of her tamped down, smoothed over, desperate not to make this any harder on him, not to bleed where he can see it.

It’s with frightening clarity, that he realizes - she’ll let him go, if he tells her to.

His certainty shatters. He thinks of the closing of a chapter.

“No,” he says, and pretends not to notice the weak breath of relief that trembles her chest. “Not yet.”

“A wise decision, I think.” Nedzu shuts the last file on his desk, and levels him a familiar look - the not-quite-there grin, the gleam of pride, the curated mask of composure. “Well, then, I believe we’re done here. Congratulations on your transfer to 1-A, Shinsou. I look forward to seeing you.”

Somehow, the words still carry that old magic. It sparks against the shadow of his former self, flames catching on something long-thought dead, breathing life into the embers of a passion, a *want*, so electric that it used to sing through his blood, and Hitoshi can’t help but straighten at the newly foreign sensation. It tugs at something behind his ribs - hope taken root.

Something blooms in the pit of his chest and turns its face towards the sun.

A New Student

Chapter Notes

So happy to have finally gotten to this chapter. Had a blast writing it. Hope y'all enjoy!

The weekend comes like a watercolour dream - a gentle repose, a trembling quiet before the storm. Mom cooks enough to feed a village, Hitoshi dredges his old uniform up from nowhere. They watch anything but the news, filling the silence with foreign films and old TV shows, volume low in the background while they eat, or talk about moving, or play one of the card games he lerned from the League.

He remembers how to be a *person* - does the laundry, cleans his room, reminds himself how to do long division. He irons his uniform, tosses out his empty med bottles, finally gets Eri's butterfly drawing framed, and *waits* , for the panic to sink in, the regret, the cold feet.

It never comes.

Instead, Monday comes.

It's a short drive to UA, a security guard waving them through the front gates, an awkward final embrace across the car's console, and a mask so firmly in place that by the time he pulls away, mom's assurance of, "You got this. I know you do," barely sends a twinge of emotion through him.

Outside the car, the main pavilion looms overhead, streaming banner in UA's colours, bright and bold. Hitoshi has to crane his head back to see it all from this close, a move that sends his head spinning, familiarity warring with unease. He rights himself as the doors open and a dark figure approaches. It only takes him a second to identify his escort - Snipe.

Snipe isn't a teacher he knows well, beyond a few brief interactions in the halls or at school events. His gaze is inscrutable, his shoulders set, and Hitoshi mirrors him on instinct, ready to reflect whatever he wants, only to stop short when Snipe folds into a deep bow. "Good to see you, Shinsou."

While certainly not familiar, his voice is warm, earnest. Hitoshi stifles his surprise, and bows in return. When he rises, Snipes gestures to the

doors, and Hitoshi falls into step.

It's the smell that hits him first. The scent of a thousand teenagers, masked in industrial-level cleaning agent and something distinctly *school*, so innately familiar it staggers him. The halls are empty - brightly light and spotless as ever, his reflection gleaming off the polished floors. Muffled voices drift from beyond the classroom doors. Homeroom started 10 minutes ago, but they don't seem to be in any rush.

The armed escort feels a *bit* much, but then again, it wouldn't befit anyone for some straggler student to run into him alone in the hallway. Not before the news has broken, at least. And even then.

He lets himself be marched like a parade float, down the twisting halls and all the way to his locker. He's half expecting it to be covered in graffiti - some anti-League expletives or lewd drawings, but of course, UA is much too preppy a school to entertain such a thing. Muscle memory has his fingers dance through the combination lock without pause. The interior is dusty and stale, his old shoes and wrinkled textbooks tossed about haphazardly. He hesitates, then pockets a single pencil and notebook.

"Ready?" Snipe asks.

He shuts the locker. "Ready."

Snipe accompanies him all the way to the doors of 1-A. Here, muscle memory fails him at last, and Hitoshi slows, lingering. He can faintly make out a voice within - Aizawa's familiar drawl, delivering a lecture by the sounds of it. Snipe waits several paces back, exuding nothing but patience.

Nervousness roils in his stomach, but his thoughts are strangely quiet. Anxious, but not scared, and he realizes belatedly that it's been a long time since those two things didn't come hand-in-hand.

But this isn't life or death, for once - these are simply the normal nerves that come with joining a new class of peers. The sensation is rather novel.

He waits for a lull in Aizawa's lecture. Breathes, flexes his hands, rolls his neck, and slides the door open.

The spotlight clicks on in the back of his head as twenty pairs of eyes swivel his way. It's far too many to clock individual expressions, and

he doesn't bother trying, just calmly closes the door behind him, and waits.

Aizawa breaks the tension expertly. He simply continues to talk - a slow, meandering sentence—something about a training exercise, Hitoshi thinks, though god knows he can't hear a word of it over the roar in his ears—which takes long enough that several gazes begin to skip between them, as if wondering whether Aizawa has even noticed the sudden presence of a former criminal in his class.

At last, Aizawa sighs, and says, “Class, we have a new student joining us today. Please give him your attention.” Then, “Shinsou, you may introduce yourself.”

He steps back from the podium and gestures for Hitoshi to approach, which he does numbly. Their eyes meet for a moment - too short for anything of substance to be communicated, but Hitoshi's heart lurches anyway, desperately clinging to the shred of recognition.

He lets none of it show. He takes the podium, and faces the class with all the gravity the situation demands.

“My name is Shinsou Hitoshi. I'm transferring from 1-C. I'm happy to meet you all and I hope we can get along well.”

He drops into a bow, low enough to hide his face—too hide from theirs, maybe—and waits for the incredulous silence to pass.

He doesn't wait long.

“Are you kidding me?”

The words are directed over his head, toward Aizawa. He dares to glance up.

“Are you *seriously* fucking kidding me?” Bakugou's chair scrapes against the floor as he lurches to his feet, his face a furious storm. “You expect me to share a class with *him* ?”

“Well,” Aizawa says mildly. “You can leave, if you'd rather.”

Bakugou glowers. “How the hell does a villain get to join the hero course? A *known* villain?”

In an odd way, Hitoshi's glad.

Really, there was bound to be some sort of eruption, his arrival being

the bombshell that it is, and he would rather know where he stands from the start than be blindsided further down the road. At least Bakugou's being honest. At least he's bold enough to say it. He's hardly the only one thinking it.

He takes the chance to scan the scene. Most of the students are clearly uncomfortable, fidgeting, gazes averted, expressions shuttered. A few are more curious - raised eyebrows, wide eyes, shoulders tight with apprehension. Another handful look downright hostile, fists clenched and bristling.

There's only one empty desk - front left corner. Where Hagakure must have sat.

"If you've paid any attention to the news these past few weeks, you'll know that that title is no longer applicable to Shinsou," Aizawa says.

Bakugou looks ready to break something. Aizawa looks ready to call his bluff. Hitoshi wonders, distantly, what he must look like, caught between them. His face feels hot, his hands ice-cold. His scar is a burning, itching noose. He ought to say something, probably, but suspects his input wouldn't exactly be welcomed right now.

Another chair scrapes back. Hitoshi's gaze flickers to the back right corner of the room, where Ochako stands, her mouth set in a furious, trembling slant - as if holding back some great mountain of emotion. "It's nice to meet you, Shinsou," she says loudly.

On her heels, a few weaker voices echo the sentiment, but Hitoshi forgets to track them. His gaze is locked with hers, wordless with gratitude. He gives a small nod.

"You can take a seat, Shinsou." Aizawa gestures for the empty desk. "You too, Bakugou."

Bakugou's nostrils flare as he slowly lowers to his chair. As luck would have it, Hitoshi's spot is directly in front of him, so that he can feel the hairs on the back of his neck rising as he slides into place, angry daggers already being stabbed into his skull.

Still, it's a small mercy. He's in the leftmost corner of the room, his expression and scar hidden from the view of everyone behind him. He can meet Aizawa's eye, which he does, as if expecting some secret message to be conveyed, but of course, Aizawa is still visible to the entire class, and masked just as tightly for it.

He looks at the desk instead, lowers his pencil and notebook, and runs his fingers along the seams of the wood, reverent, searching for a piece of her. No carvings or drawings etched into the wood, of course - she'd have known better than to draw that sort of attention to herself. There's nothing. Not a single smudge of ink or stray eraser shedding. No sign she was ever here at all.

He straightens, feels twenty pairs of eyes track the motion, the entire world watching. He meets Aizawa's gaze again, and nods.

"Moving on to today's lesson," Aizawa says. "We'll be going over the answers from the midterm."

Hitoshi has no midterm to mark, but sits and lets the white noise of the lecture wash over him, scratching down the answers in his notebook just for something to occupy his hands.

For all that he hates the spotlight, Aizawa is an excellent performer, his flat voice and dead-eyed expression expertly sapping the tension from the air, but Hitoshi can still feel it, simmering beneath. When the lesson inevitably ends, and Aizawa asks, "Any questions?", Hitoshi can hear at least ten hands fly into the air behind him, and would bet his life not a single one of them has anything to do with the midterm.

"Yes, Yaoyorozu?"

"Sensei, will Shinsou be moving into the dorms with us?"

He turns in his seat, to try to get a look at the other students. The boy beside him—whose name he never learned—has done the same, but somehow also sprouted an extra eye, attached to a stalk and pointed squarely in Hitoshi's direction. He jolts in his seat, barely remembering to school his face.

"No, not at the moment," Aizawa says. "Todoroki?"

"Will Shinsou be taking part in any off-campus training or school excursions?"

"When such things resume, yes."

Another hand shoots into the air, and Midoriya doesn't even wait to

be called on. “When will such things resume, sensei?”

Aizawa’s face twitches. “When it is deemed safe.”

Yaoyorozu again: “With all due respect, how are we ever supposed to consider ourselves safe with the League of Villains at our door? Sensei, we had a traitor in our midst for *months* and now we’re welcoming *another* with open arms?” Her voice creeps up, the anger thinly-veiled. “Has anyone considered the position that puts us in?”

Another girl - pink skin. Ashido Something. “Who’s to say he’s not going to turn on us again? Like *she* did?”

A heavy pause. Hitoshi stares at his perfect, smooth desk, and feels sick.

Aizawa sits heavily on the edge of his desk, mouth pressed thin. He sighs, and there’s something deeply weary in the sound. “Your concerns are all valid. You guys have been through a lot - more than any kids your age should have to. It’s good to be vigilant, and to ask questions. There are some answers that I can’t share right now. But I want you all to rest assured that Nedzu and I have put a lot of consideration into this, and I can personally vouch for Shinsou. I never would have agreed to have him here if I thought it might put you in danger.”

It’s a good speech - honest, without being anywhere close to the truth. Aizawa doesn’t dismiss their concerns or shut down their questions. He faces them directly, as if they were equals.

It’s the exact same technique he used on Hitoshi during their lessons at Jōshubi. The realization strikes unexpectedly. Something about seeing it now, here, after all this time, slots into place a belated understanding, made clear with distance.

“Shinsou, anything you’d like to add?”

A mixture of emotions swim behind his chest - a protectiveness that shocks him, and an ugly, twisting shame. But he’s learned to perform as well - learned to weave half-truths from lies and sow trust in deceit, to compose himself so utterly that he can stand and face the wolves at his back without a flicker off-script.

Center-stage, he dons a new mask, one for each of the wary gazes trained his way. These are children. Children who are scared, who have been burned by villains before, and only know one way to fight

back. He won't allow himself do the same.

"I know lots of you have been hurt by villains, by people that I've worked with. I can understand if you don't trust me. I don't dismiss that. I can only give you my word that I want nothing more than to make sure that none of you- that *nobody*, is ever hurt by villains again. I hope you give me time to prove that through my actions as well." He bows again, long and low, a silent prayer cast like a desperate, grasping hand - that they hear him, that they believe him, that they're brave enough to reach back.

"Nicely said, Shinsou. Thank you," Aizawa says. "Now, does anyone actually have any *actual* questions about the midterm?"

This time, no hands go up.

Second period rolls around without further issue. Present Mic waltzes in, flashes Hitoshi a dazzling grin and thumbs up, and assures him, "You missed the lesson on past participles last week, bud, but it's pretty easy stuff. I'll give you a quick rundown before lunch."

The lesson marches along at Mic's usual break-neck pace, and it's all so horribly normal that for a while, Hitoshi forgets to be nervous about the fact that Aizawa's gone.

Then lunch period arrives, and reality plummets back down. He watches 1-A trickle to the door, the hallway beyond already rushing with hundreds of murmurs and footsteps as classes let out school-wide, and feels his heart trace.

Mic holds him back, as promised.

"So, Shinsou, your marks in English were already pretty good, but you did miss some stuff earlier this semester. There are a couple of things you'll wanna review." He hands him a sheet of paper, crammed with Mic's sprawling script - all the lessons he's missed and readings he'll have to catch up on. Hitoshi slides it between two pages of his notebook. He can't bring himself to look at it just yet.

Mic continues, "We have a quiz next week but it's only going to be on future tense, so you really don't have to worry about the rest, 'kay?"

“Thank you, sensei.”

There’s a pause, already unusual enough from Mic, before Hitoshi registers the crooked smile and soft look in his eye. “We’re glad to have you back, kid, you know that?”

Hitoshi straightens. He’d nearly forgotten - it’s not just Aizawa anymore. *All* the teachers know the truth now, the whole ugly mess of it.

“If you have any problems with the other students, you let us know, yeah?”

He nods, and repeats, “Thank you, sensei.”

Mic gives another one of those mega-watt smiles, and looks like he wants to clap him on the shoulder, but aborts the movement at the last second and juts his chin towards the door instead. “You got some friends waiting for you.”

Hitoshi follows the movement with a glance, and finds a small cluster of familiar faces - Iida Tenya, Tsuyu Asui, and Midoriya, headed by Ochako.

He’s still reeling from the morning’s events - the names and faces of his new peers, the judgement and curiosity in their eyes—which presented threats and which presented openings—pounding in his skull and against the brittle edges of his mask. But there’s no time to shed it now.

He schools himself, considers his current odds - he doesn’t *think* any of these classmates are about to kill him. And Mic’s right there, so. It’s probably as good a time as ever to tackle this particular hurdle.

A smile would read as fake from a mile away. Hitoshi lets his nervousness show as he approaches.

Ochako speaks first, her voice bright with false cheer. “Hi, Shinsou! We were wondering if you wanted to sit with us at lunch?”

Hitoshi doesn’t miss the way the others haven’t offered any greetings of their own. He nods. “Sure. Thank you.”

They move in-step - Iida in front, his broad shoulders clearing a path through the crowded hall. Ochako pins herself to his left, Tsuyu beside her, while Midoriya quietly brings up the rear - which is weird, un-

Midoriya-like behaviour, and an observation he pockets for later consideration. Right now, he's too focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

There are a *lot* of people out here, and judging by the *speed-of-sound* way that high school gossip travels, most of them are already aware of his presence. They're staring, and they're not the only ones.

Ochako averts her gaze from his scar so fast it's as if she's been burned. "Sorry."

"It's okay."

Her eyes cast about for a distraction. "So, um. Are you liking 1-A so far?" The words are painfully forced. She must realize it, too - her stiff smile barely withholds a cringe.

Hitoshi takes some solace in the fact that she's obviously feeling as awkward as him. But she's making an effort—which is more than he expected from *anyone* on day one—and he knows he should too. "I'm happy to be back."

"Oh, good! That's good."

They make it to the cafeteria without further incident. Inside, brilliant fluorescents gleam over polished tables, already crowded with dozens of bodies. He slams into a solid wall of noise, and flinches in the doorway, ears ringing. Ochako steers him deftly into the buffet line. She seems to have regained her vigor, piling her tray high while they wait, chattering about everything and nothing - the winter break, the midterm, Mic's upcoming quiz. Hitoshi listens with half an ear, scouring the buffet for something that won't turn his stomach.

Afterwards, they move as a unit to a nearby table, where Todoroki Shouto is already seated across from Tokoyami Towa and the kid with the extra eyeballs. As they approach, the latter two share a glance, then rise without a word, trays in hand.

Todoroki looks like he wants to follow, but Midoriya catches his eye in a long stare that pins him in place, before he reluctantly slides over, and Hitoshi finds himself being slotted onto the bench beside him. The rest of his entourage fill the opposite bench, Ochako to his left.

Even at his best in 1-C, Hitoshi never moved in a unit like this, never dominated a whole table with a group of friends. He doesn't know whether to be grateful or absolutely terrified.

He can't hide his face like in homeroom. He's surrounded, pinned on display, his scar stark and red and seemingly magnetic for the way everyone's eyes keep flitting toward it. His skin prickles.

"So, how'd everyone do on the midterm?" Midoriya says abruptly.

"80 percent," Iida reports. There's a beat of silence. Then, "The multiple choice section was surprisingly difficult."

"Yeah!" Ochako agrees heartily. "I felt like it went on forever."

Hitoshi wills himself to relax, to fade into the background of the conversation that, soon enough, even Todoroki joins. No one seems to expect him to add much of anything, and he can hardly bring himself to listen - his entire body still buzzing with white noise.

This is bad. His chest is tight, breath coming short. He's gotten careless in his recovery, too used to the solitude, to performing only for small crowds or from a distance. This is so much more - the heat of a dozen gazes on his back, the inaudible snippets of conversation from nearby tables, the entirely *too* audible echo of Bakugou's shouts from across the room, the flutter of fingers against his arm, so startling that he flinches, sending his chopsticks clattering across his tray.

Ochako pulls back sharply. "Sorry!"

He sucks down a sharp breath, snuffs out the panic in his chest. "No, it's okay. It's just - a lot." His hand drifts to his neck - an old tell, long abandoned since Nedzu pointed it out - and he jerks it down swiftly.

Ochako watches, guilty eyes lingering on his neck. "Does it hurt?"

Hitoshi considers.

She feels responsible for what happened in Saitama, that much is obvious. That works in his favour, for now, but he can't lean on it too much. Her judgement may be too clouded to notice, but her friends' won't be. They might think he's taking advantage.

And then of course, there's his scar - another tool he could use to garner sympathy. Anyone who's seen his interview knows how he got it, if the handprint shape isn't obvious enough. Still, he can't rely on it too much.

Hagakure won't come back with scars. None that can be seen, anyway.

“It itches, mostly,” he says at last. “By the way, I never got to ask - were you okay, after that night in Saitama?”

“I was fine, Shinsou. I was able to get out through a window.”

“Good,” he says, heartfelt. “I was worried there may have been more guards.”

She shakes her head. “It was too easy. Like they *wanted* me to get away. I didn’t realize it at the time, but it was a test, wasn’t it?”

The others have fallen silent, eyeing them openly, or doing a bad job of pretending not to. Hitoshi keeps his gaze on Ochako. “The League had started to suspect something was up with me before then. When I went back for you, it was just the final nail in the coffin, I guess. And, well—” He gestures to himself.

Iida pipes up from across the table. “That’s horrible that they would do that to one of their own.” He pauses, then hastily corrects, “That they would do that to anyone.”

Ochako nods. “In your interview you said you had reached out to the Heroes. That’s why they were suspicious?”

They’ve got the whole table’s attention now, and who knows how many others. Hitoshi chooses his words with care. “Yes. The League had met with another villain gang, and I found out that they were... hurting a young girl. Experimenting on her quirk.”

Varying dark expressions. Some glance away in discomfort, others curl their hands into fists.

Hitoshi lets himself do neither. “I couldn’t live with it,” he says simply. “I’m sorry, I can’t really say much more. It’s part of an ongoing investigation.”

The others nod in solemn understanding, all except Tsuyu, who leans across the table, eyes narrowed. Her voice is quiet but sharp. “What about Hagakure?”

For a moment, he imagines telling them. Telling them everything. Imagines that same outrage and horror on Hagakure’s behalf, imagines that her abuse at the hands of a hero would make them as angry and self-righteous as Eri’s at the hands of a villain.

He shakes his head. “I met her a few times, but I wasn’t involved with

most of her conversations with the League. I don't know how much she knew. But I know she was your friend. I'm sorry she hurt you. I can't imagine what that must feel like."

Hitoshi can't watch their every reaction at once. He settles for the one directly across from him. Midoriya levels a long stare his way, face just slightly tilted, gaze thoughtful. Hitoshi thinks for a moment, then hesitantly adds, "For what it's worth—and I know it might not be much, right now—she really cared about you guys."

Tsuyu scoffs. "Funny way of showing it."

Hitoshi hesitates. They're entitled to their anger, of course. "I know," he says gently. "I wish things had been different."

There's more he could say, a thousand other words that scrape like jagged glass against his throat. If they had only been there, if they had only *seen* her. But they weren't. No one was. That version of Hagakure is uniquely invisible - bordering on nonexistent. A fragile thing he's constructed in his mind, primed to topple at the slightest gust of wind.

The others won't hear it yet. *Can't* hear it yet, beyond the deafening noise of their anger and hurt. It feels like treason to bite his tongue, to leave that part of her as unheard as it's been unseen, and yet he does.

It's not his story to tell. Not yet. And not without her.

A Ghost

Hitoshi's first few days back at UA pass in a similar manner - with most teachers privately confiding that they're *glad to see him back*, and most students staunchly proving the opposite.

There's Bakugou on Monday afternoon, planting himself in the middle of the hallway and declaring that Hitoshi "had better watch out." The stream of students around them grinds to a halt, giving space for a fight that Hitoshi refuses to offer.

On Tuesday, there's Monoma, storming the cafeteria armed with all the tabloid headlines he could gather and a tinfoil-hat style speech on how the events of the past few weeks are an elaborate ruse to conceal the fact that Hitoshi's still working for the League.

Then there's a third-year who corners him by his locker on Wednesday - a student whose name Hitoshi doesn't even know, but whose mouthful of shark-like teeth he certainly won't forget. "You might have the staff fooled," she growls. "But we're watching you."

None of them come to violence, and few of them last any longer than a minute or two. Hitoshi bites his tongue and lets them each say their piece. It's not worth it to talk back - he doubts any of them would respond, anyway. People talk *at* him or *about* him just fine, but few are brave enough to risk his quirk.

Mostly though, he finds himself plagued by icy silences, glares that follow him from room to room, like they had in the early days of 1-C.

Behind it comes the lurch of an old, rotted anger, like something risen from the grave, still half-buried in the dirt - a fossilized understanding that he'll never be rid of this assumption, this insistence, that his quirk and its place in this school must be bad, must be wrong, used only to deceive and betray.

He swallows it down down down, into the ugly place within him where all his doubt and self-loathing reside. He can't afford to wallow in it. He has a role to play.

As the week drags on, he finds his foothold - a group that consists of Ochako doing the talking, and her friends reluctantly trudging in to fill the silences he all too often leaves her. They're not nice to *him*, not directly, but they're nice to *her* and she's nice to him, and so, by

proxy, they come to be included in Hitoshi's pool of test subjects for villain-hero rehabilitation.

Ochako is his main opening. He's a ship, and she's apparently decided that she's going down with him. She offers him help in every assignment, adds him to every class groupchat, and will hardly let him step foot down the hallway without offering to accompany him.

With her comes Tsuyu, who follows Ochako with such steadfast, level-headed solidarity Hitoshi's paranoia flares wide open and he can't help but feel like it's all an act. She blunts his suspicions slightly by keeping an obvious step of distance between them, and he appreciates the honesty of it - the way she's saying, *I'm here for Ochako, not for you*.

Another recurring face is Iida, who remains politely cold up until the fourth day, when he turns to Hitoshi mid-sentence and says, "I'm Iida Tenya, by the way," with such a bashful expression that Hitoshi can tell he's just overcome some internal war.

Todoroki is less polite and more cold, but he too follows his friends and weathers the storm of being seen in Hitoshi's presence, which, really, is all he can ask. Hitoshi doesn't take his silences personally - neither of them exactly engender lively conversation.

Midoriya presents more of an oddity, and Hitoshi can't *help* but take his silences personally. Where once Midoriya was happy to declare them friends-based on *what* evidence, god only knew—he now gives Hitoshi a wide berth, always trailing a few steps behind, only participating in the stilted conversations Ochako ropes him into when prompted. He seems to make a point of it - his gaze never quite even with Hitoshi's, his words never quite aimed his way.

Who could blame him? Midoriya has experienced what it's like to be under the influence of Hitoshi's quirk twice now, and he's probably hoping to avoid a third incident. Hitoshi tries not to begrudge him for it, even if, deep down, he'd been hoping for a warmer reception.

The rest of 1-A, for the most part, seem keen to ignore him whenever possible. It's not hard - Hitoshi keeps out of their way, keeps quiet and polite and entirely forgettable, and with little to sustain it, even the relentless high school gossip mill has to move on eventually. It's something Hagakure must have been intimately familiar with - the vantage point of nonexistence. He's like a ghost, a haunting presence they're all aware of, but pretend not to be.

It's from these shadows that he watches the other students, cataloging their quiet interactions, their unguarded moments, when he and their disdain for him fade away, when *their* masks are finally down.

The girls of 1-A are the most troubling, he suspects on account of the fact that they were the closest with Hagakure and therefore the most intimately hurt by her betrayal. A small part of him takes solace in this fact - if they truly considered her a friend, they may be more willing to accept her back one day.

Yaoyorozu is nice to him in the way that class reps have to be - purely perfunctory, though she's obviously skeptical of his presence. She's wary, but curious too. Like her quirk, she demands an intimate knowledge of the world's composition. He's a threat, an unknown entity, and one she wants to know more about.

Ashido and Jirou are less predictable, hot-heated and cold in turn - sometimes vocal in their discontent, other times quietly stewing. He prefers the former because it's easier to read, and the latter because it doesn't draw quite so much attention, but either way, he's hesitant to make any advances with them yet, opting to wait for their grudges to settle.

Another good target presents itself in the form of Kirishima - who, after several days of closely watching him, finally convinces Hitoshi that he is genuinely just *that* nice. Kirishima comforts and inspires his friends - loud, flashy, and unapologetically emotional. If Hitoshi could recruit him as a ally, he'd be excellent at pitching his case to others. The problem, of course, is his unfortunate proximity to Bakugou, which swiftly shoots down that dream. That's *definitely* not a battle he's ready to fight.

All told, it's a lot to wrap his head around - new personalities to analyze and new strategies to devise, to say nothing of the *actual* schoolwork he's supposed to be doing. For that, he has Aizawa's help, in the form of a private tutoring session every Friday. Another one of Nedzu's ideas - one he's actually looking forward to, for once.

After the final bell, he extracts himself from Ochako and bids a hasty farewell, then slinks off to the bathroom while the rest of the student body trails towards their dormitories and homes. It's a stark remind of how he used to sneak off to cram school months ago, hiding in cramped bathroom stalls while waiting for the coast to clear.

Once alone, he makes the return trip to homeroom, footsteps echoing

in the silence, the unnatural stillness that hangs in the air in absence of a thousand voices.

He finds the door to 1-A propped open, Aizawa at his desk within, head bent and scowling down at a tablet. Whatever he's reading has got him deep in thought, and not a happy one, by the looks of it. He doesn't seem to notice Hitoshi's arrival.

He announces himself with a knock, and Aizawa beckons him without a word, not bothering to lift his eyes from the screen. Hitoshi steps through the door and closes it behind him, uncertain what to expect. This is *Aizawa*, he knows, but something about seeing him here, after all this time, slots into place that old barrier that used to exist between them - teacher and student, nothing more.

He decides to play it safe, offers a bow with a murmured, "Sensei."

Aizawa's head jerks up, a knot of confusion in his brow, like he's only just seen him. Then he cracks a smile. "Laying it on a little thick, eh?"

He relaxes at once into the familiar tone. "Had to get your attention somehow." Curiosity carries him to the next words. "What are you reading?"

Aizawa's grin contorts into something more forced. "Nothing." He tosses the tablet aside, then seems to think better of it. "QuirkBlog," he admits.

Hitoshi frowns. He's been so busy with school that he hasn't even bothered to see what the tabloids are putting out this week, other than UA's press release announcing his return. It's probably a good thing, anyway. The tides of public favour don't turn that fast - he's got *years* of this shit to go. He can't afford to get bogged down or lose faith because a couple of assholes online have nothing better to do than to spew the same unimaginative death threats over and over.

Hitoshi walks to his desk, slinks his bag across it, the picture of casual. "Anything interesting?"

Aizawa sees right through the act, and the gentleness of his answer betrays it. "Just the usual. For now."

Of course. It's only been a week, after all. Public opinion doesn't shift without the individual change of hearts, and he's hardly even put a dent in 1-A's.

“Right,” Hitoshi says, false determination like iron in his chest. “For now.”

“How is everything, so far? Anyone giving you trouble? I heard Kaminari gave you a big speech during third period yesterday.”

And Tetsutetsu during fourth. And Ashido, just this morning. Hitoshi shrugs. “Most of the time they just ignore me.”

“They’ll come around,” Aizawa says, and the conviction in his voice could nearly be genuine. “How’s the workload?”

“Fine.” He was granted an automatic pass for all his classes last semester, courtesy of Nedzu. Now it’s just a matter of playing catch up.

Aizawa nods, then delicately adds, “1-A goes back to Hero training on Monday. Five sessions a week. How’s it going with your quirk? Have you noticed any differences since the injury?”

A vestigial fear skitters down his spine, an imperceptible tremor. Hitoshi quietly invites it to *go fuck itself*.

His quirk still works. That much he knows. He almost used it on Fukumen, in his blind rage - had felt the swell of power gather on his tongue. Even now it simmers on his breath, reawakened, patiently waiting to be summoned.

But Aizawa is looking down at him, gaze as soft as Hitoshi’s ever seen it, and suddenly, something else twists through him, stilling the admission - a deep, ugly shame, rising up like a ghost from the darkness within him.

“I don’t think so,” is all he says.

“You haven’t used it?”

He shakes his head, unable to form the lie with words.

For a moment, he thinks Aizawa might force him to, might banish the mystery right here and now, might offer himself up as a test subject like he did so long ago.

But Aizawa only watches him, a solemn kind of understanding written in the stare. “Okay,” he says. “I have an idea.”

This might not be his best idea.

Shouta can admit that much, in the privacy of his own mind, as he and Hitoshi make their way across campus to the training facilities.

What he should really do—what any respectable Hero Stream teacher would do—is sit down with Hitoshi and address the problem head on, work through whatever mental barrier he’s thrown up around his quirk, as ruthless and direct as he’s always claimed to be.

Instead, he indulges himself, lets himself play favourites, just this once. God knows the kid’s earned it.

He leads the way to the multi-purpose gym without preamble, as if this is something they’ve done a hundred times. It isn’t, of course—the Gen Ed students don’t get to use these facilities—but Hitoshi’s face is a perfect mask, void of the wonder of a typical first year, showing only a muted curiosity, even as Shouta reveals the multi-terrain mechanisms.

He rifles through a few different options until he settles on the one best suited to the task. Exposed piping dangles from the ceiling in thick rungs, half pillars rising from the uneven floor. It’s a far cry from the crowded, dusty old gym at Jōshubi.

If Hitoshi’s not ready to use his quirk, fine. Shouta won’t force him. But he can at least give him something else to defend himself. Maybe they can put in a tech order with the Support Department. Something with blasters, maybe. Something that really screams, *Don’t fuck with me*.

But for now, this will do.

He unspools his weapon from around his neck, and with a deft flick of his wrist, whips it around the nearest pipe. He pulls it taut, tests the weight, then releases and repeats the maneuver. Hitoshi watches the demonstration quietly, without a hint of expectation.

Shouta tosses him one end of the weapon. “Go on, then.”

Hitoshi reels it in slowly, fingers dancing around the fabric. He fists it in hand, stretches it, and cocks his head, considering the weight. He steps forward to take Shouta’s space, and mimics his stance perfectly.

He throws.

“Step into it more,” Shouta instructs. “Push off your back foot.”

Hitoshi obeys without complaint. He resets, and throws again. The second attempt is better, but still falls short.

“Unfurl it more. Give yourself some slack.”

They continue like this - Shouta’s instructions increasingly specific, Hitoshi’s throws increasingly accurate, until, on the fifth attempt, he finally secures around the pole.

There. A flicker of a smile - the first genuine one Shouta’s seen all day. Hell, all week.

The celebration is short-lived. Hitoshi reels in the fabric and awaits his next instruction, ever the professional. But there’s something more fluid in his stance now, more *him*, and a spark in his eye that Shouta would recognize in any student.

He nurtures the flame. He shows Hitoshi how to pull back to secure the hold, the special flick of the wrist to make it release and contract. He demonstrates a variety of maneuvers—hanging, swinging, climbing, balancing—and walks Hitoshi through the basic capture knots.

It’s not blasters, but it’s something. Hitoshi moves quick with his new weapon in hand, surefooted in a way that soothes something in Shouta he didn’t know needed soothing. He’s already planning more advanced drills when the chirp of his phone cuts him short.

A text from Tsukauchi. *You coming?*

He checks the time. They’ve gone well past their hour limit.

Reality plummets down with the realization of what he’s forgotten. He was meant to go to Musutafu PD tonight, to meet with the prosecution team for Chisaki’s trial.

He glances up, an apology on his tongue, to find the weapon already spooled neatly in Hitoshi’s hands. He hands it over without a word, and though he’s far too cunning to wear his disappointment openly, Shouta’s is heavy enough to share.

He looks at the weapon, at Hitoshi, at his phone, and feels another bad idea starting to form.

They make it to Musutafu PD without death or dismemberment. By all accounts, the kid's a natural. A few high velocity plummets notwithstanding.

Even Hitoshi's cryptic facade can only hold so long against that kind of heart-pounding adrenaline, and by the time they touch down on solid earth, his ruddy cheeks and windswept hair frame a giddy, incredulous grin that matches Shouta's, his laughter still ringing in the wind. Another first. Shouta can't even conjure to mind the last time he heard it.

"I think I pulled something," he admits, just to earn another round of it.

Hitoshi snorts. "You *are* getting pretty old. Might have to retire soon."

All at once, he's struck with a memory from weeks ago - Toshinori at his side in an empty classroom, troubled gaze cast to the future. *Our time is coming to a close. They'll catch up to you before you know it.*

Without thought, Shouta reaches out, places a hand on top of Hitoshi's head, like he could just. Pin him there. Freeze this moment in time.

Something in his body sings *this this this*. He wants to remember this, to hold this moment, seal it in resin, lock it away. He feels mad with desperation, like he has only an instant to do so.

But the moment slips past, like every other. Hitoshi has gone perfectly still beneath him, eyes searching his face, and Shouta retracts the hand, sheepishly. "We need to get you a weapon," he recovers thickly. "Or something with blasters."

Hitoshi laughs again, and Shouta's heart sings with it.

Caught Up

Chapter Notes

A very happy Valentine's day to all my lovers and friends <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The first two weeks at UA are somehow both exactly as exhausting as Hitoshi thought they'd be, and a hundred times worse. The days blur past in a rush of lessons that drone on and hero training that pushes him to near collapse, his nights a mixture of homework and clandestine runs. Between them, there are the private lessons with Aizawa, the evenings spent barricaded indoors with mom, the hectic meetings with Tsukauchi and the lawyers in preparation for the trial.

He doesn't breathe a word of complaint. Not when his muscles seize and shake from the strain of training, or when his head pounds and his eyes ache beneath the glaring fluorescents of the cafeteria, or when he wakes from another nightmare with his scar burning a hole in his neck. He marches dutifully from one moment to the next, mask ever-shifting, and for a few days, it's fine. It's manageable. He plays his part. He compartmentalizes. He's done it before.

On Friday, he makes it home from school with barely any memory of the journey. He stands in the center of his room, gaze listless, waiting for his mind to catch up with the rest of him. Exhaustion pulses in his skull, a sluggish drumbeat that only intensifies as he drags himself to his desk, despite his body screaming otherwise, begging to be swallowed beneath the covers of his bed.

He has a metric ton of homework to do, not to mention his witness statement to rehearse, but his mind is buzzing with two week's worth of interactions - new faces and names, the boisterous personalities and bristling egos of 1-A, the narrowly-avoided pitfalls and potential avenues for progress which he still hasn't had time to process, let alone put to action.

He's made decent headway with Ochako's help, and a few of the others like Iida and Tsuyu have already begun to warm up to him. But Todoroki still won't talk to him, and worse still, Midoriya will hardly *look* at him.

It's not so much the insult that hurts, but the fact that Hitoshi can't

figure out *why*. Midoriya's never been the kind to hold back on his emotions. If he were angry, he would say something, surely. And yet he ducks his gaze whenever Hitoshi searches it out, tiptoes around him like he's walking on broken glass. There's no fear in his eyes that Hitoshi can place, but it's something close - something uneasy, something guarded. It's been bothering him all week, and he gains no further clarity on it now.

He blinks desperately, willing his gaze to sharpen, but the cluttered surface of his desk refuses to cooperate. He's caught up to himself, to his own relentless pace. It's as if his body knows they're finally off-stage, finally *safe*. It's all he can do to keep upright.

He wants a smoke. He wants to run. He wants to scream or cry or punch something. He wants to scroll mindlessly through social media. He wants to do absolutely anything *but that*.

He does none of those things - just sits, and stares at nothing, and snaps to attention some indiscernible time later at a soft knock on his door, lies with ease, *Yeah, I could eat*, and follows mom to the table for a meal he can hardly taste.

It's a quiet meal, but mom seems to expect this. They've moved well beyond the forced questions of *How was school?* and *Did you make any friends?* He searches for peace in the silence, finds it a moment later when she lays her hand over his, the warm glow of her quirk bleeding through the touch.

She retracts it after only a moment. "Sorry, I know you hate when I do that."

He grasps her wrist and drags it back. Mom tenses, then yields without a fight. They sit with heads bent together, her thumbs tracing soft circles against the back of his hand. Hitoshi remembers to breathe.

Saturday morning, he stumbles from bed later than usual, bleary-eyed and pale from a nightmare. He'd been standing in homeroom with Ochako, which became an alley, which became a warehouse, and as the black fog had circled in to choke him, she'd sighed and said in Toga's voice, *Oh Toshi, you really should have known better, huh?*

The sun is high by the time he drags himself outside for his run, the air warm with the faint promise of spring. The fog of sleep clings to him, though not enough to miss the stares he's pulling. He picks up his pace.

Another five minutes, and his breath is coming hard, the back of his neck tight with the all-too-familiar sensation of being watched. He pauses to stretch, cranes his neck and glances behind him.

A few blocks down, someone darts behind the corner.

His heart stutters, a wire of panic pulled tight around his chest. He takes off at a dead sprint. It's three blocks before he lets himself slow. Another five before he lets himself stop.

He ducks beneath an overpass, lungs heaving. A train thunders overhead, the deafening rattle of the tracks as loud as his fear. He waits for it to pass, for the silence to creep back in, glances behind him and meets an empty street.

Hitoshi breathes until the wire loosens, fills his lungs and shakes out the nervous tremor in his hands. It's fine. He's fine.

He presses on, out of the suburbs and deeper into the city, where the buildings get taller and denser, the streets wider. Several backwards glances reveal nothing of his would-be stalker. He puts his head down, eager to be lost in the crowd, and has only distantly registered that there are a *lot* more people than usual before he rounds a corner to meet a solid wall of them. Milling in storefronts, crowding the sidewalks, some even standing in the middle of the street.

He grinds to a halt and glances frantically about, finds people moving in on either side, whispers turning to murmurs turning to shouts. Most hold phones, a few carry hand-made signs - one with a picture of his face, emblazoned blood red with the word *traitor*. He absorbs these details in the nanosecond before he turns, fear like ice in his lungs, fire at the back of his neck.

And slams face-first into another figure.

Hands close around his arms, steadying, and Hitoshi chokes off on a scream.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," says the person, and he *knows* that voice, that face, those wild green eyes peering into his. "Hey, listen, there's a bunch of people down here, is it okay if I pick you up?"

“What?” He can hardly gasp the word.

Midoriya points a finger straight into the sky. “Is it okay if I pick you *up*?”

He must nod, because the next thing Hitoshi knows, he’s been crushed into Midoriya’s chest, arms wrapped tight around his back as they’re enveloped in a crackling green glow. With a bend of his knees, Midoriya sends them rocketing into the air.

Hitoshi’s soul all but ejects from his body, but Midoriya is evidently practiced in this maneuver - he bounds gracefully from one balcony to another, then up past low rooftops and beyond, Hitoshi cradled in his arms all the while.

They make it to a fourth story fire escape before Hitoshi scrambles loose, chest heaving. Midoriya hovers, hands poised to catch.

His vision swims over the scene below - a dark swarm of people crowded like ants on the sidewalk, voices loud in a chorus of protest, cameras raised to the sky. They’re still in plain view.

He glances up. The roof of the building is only another two stories tall, and with it, the promise of shelter. He starts to climb before Midoriya can get any more brilliant ideas. There’s the rattle of footsteps as Midoriya follows behind.

The roof is flat and gray. Exhaust pours from a furnace vent. Hitoshi hunkers against it, the metal hot to the touch, the stench of the exhaust enough to pierce the haze of his thoughts and white noise of the wind. He whirls around, bewildered and furious.

“Were you following me?”

“No,” Midoriya says, followed immediately by, “Yes.” Every line of his body is stretched taut, betraying his obvious discomfort. “But not because I think you’re evil.”

The utter sincerity of the words makes Hitoshi’s lip curl. “Good. Because if you did, answering that last question would be incredibly stupid.” He doesn’t need to coat his tongue in power. Just the threat is enough.

Midoriya doesn’t take the bait. “You’re not going to use your quirk on me.”

Hitoshi narrows his eyes, a challenge. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

That's two answers now. Hitoshi has him, and Midoriya knows it.

But he's right.

Hitoshi drops the act. Frustration aches in his chest, and he turns away, presses his palms to the burning metal, trying to will it away with a fresh burst of pain. He feels distinctly defenseless. "What are you doing here?"

Movement behind him. His gaze snaps back. Midoriya freezes mid-step, hands raised in a placating motion. "I'm in a lot of local Hero-watch chat forums. Some people I follow online mentioned that they had seen you in the area a few times, and someone had the idea to start tracking your movement."

Right. Of course they did. He supposes that's good, on the one hand - it's what he wanted, for Hagakure. On the other hand - she'll never approach him in front of a crowd.

"Some of the talk got pretty nasty," Midoriya continues. "Lots of people in this city really don't like you."

"I'm aware," he bites. He can't help the bitterness that creeps into his voice. "And let me guess, you wanted to help, because you're my *friend*?"

"Yeah." Midoriya shrugs, as if it's that obvious. "I mean, if that's okay with you."

Hitoshi gives him a hard look - the open stance, the unabashed face. Hell, the fact he's even here at all. But then-

"You don't talk to me at school."

Midoriya winces, but doesn't deny it. "I wasn't sure you wanted me to."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I've seen you with the other students. You don't stand up for yourself. The things they say about you, about you being a villain - you want them to believe it, don't you?"

Hitoshi frowns. The word *believe* nags at him. “They’re not baseless accusations. I did those things.”

“Shinsou.” Midoriya wears a pained smile. “It’s okay. You don’t have to convince me. I trust you.”

Trust. But not believe.

“And if you’re testing them, or trying to push them away—”

“It’s not that,” Hitoshi says. “Really. I just— I’d rather know what they think of me. What they really think. Once I know where we stand then... then I can work to change it.”

He wants the others to like him, yes, but he wants to *earn* it. He wants them to see past the guise of the traitor, past all the bullshit they’ve been fed and all the hatred they’ve been taught, the impenetrable walls of *hero* and *villain* that have been erected around them since birth, to see that those labels are nothing but the shadows cast by those walls. They can be broken down. They can be made anew.

Midoriya nods, as though confirming some suspicion. “All Might said the same thing when the news first broke about you.”

Forgiveness is something you must earn. But everyone deserves the chance to to earn it, to try to change.

“I remember,” Hitoshi says.

“You really believe that?” Midoriya asks, and only now is there finally a thread of accusation to his voice, a genuine question, bearing all the weight and pain and uncertainty it’s earned. “About the League? About Hagakure?”

Hitoshi sets his jaw, meets it head on. “I really do.”

Midoriya stares hard over the skyline, gaze distant, considering. After a moment, he cocks his head, and a small, wistful smile tugs at his lips, like he can almost see it. “I really hope you’re right.”

Things get better, a little.

It's an unsteady transition - nothing like the clean break between first and second semester, but a slower, more arduous recreation. The long nights shorten, the frost fades into cool, gray mornings. Rain clouds gather in the skies for days on end, threatening to wash away the last of winter's grime, but always disperse before they can make good on the promise.

But, things get better.

He arrives on Monday to his flock of new companions, predictable and safe. Gone are the lingering silences and stilted conversations - Midoriya steps in where Ochako can't, the easy cadence of their voices filling something the hollow drum within him, muffling the echo-chamber of his thoughts. The walk to the classroom door feels less daunting with every step, and inside, there are no sneers, no threats - just wary, guarded faces. This too, is predictable. Comforting, almost.

He can work with this. He can *change* this. He's done it before.

The rest of the week falls into a similar pattern - every morning the same as the last, until, somewhere along the way, he finds himself responding to the quips, joining the conversation, bemoaning the menial things like yesterday's homework or tomorrow's quiz, and startles himself with the laugh that catches in his throat. It rises in him easily, like brushing away cobwebs of disuse.

It's in these moments, privately, quietly, that he finds himself mourning the loss of Hagakure. Even Toga, at times. He catches echoes of their voices in the way the others speak, in the teasing and gentle ribbing that emerges as they grow more comfortable with him. There are others too - flashes of Compress in the more boisterous students, hints of Dabi off the surlier ones. Each memory spears him with an unexpected grief, the loss of their friendship stark now that he's surrounded by those offering it.

He grasps for the new lifeline instinctively, eager to find his footing, like he had with the League. This, too, comes with a familiar instinct - the unrelenting sense of danger that looms over it all, the ticking clock, the nagging suspicion that it's all *conditional*, dependent on his being *good*, doing what they want, playing his part correctly. Like they're all waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the misstep, for the confirmation of their every horrible suspicion.

It's baseless paranoia, he knows. Trauma. Another check on the long list of hurts he'll probably carry for the rest of his life. But in his

darker moments, he can't help but entertain the idea. He just wants to get it over with already, to do something bold, something to earn a reaction. He wants to kick up the dust just to see where the dust settles, and who's still standing next to him when it clears.

He has promises to keep, after all - to Aizawa, to Hagakure, to himself. He can't afford to stagnate, to get complacent in the comfort of his allies.

He still hasn't had a chance to use his quirk, after all. It's a veritable target painted on his back, and no small part of why the other students don't trust him. Even before his defection, its weight was a heavy burden, looked on with a shame and revulsion that made his skin crawl and his thoughts twist into something bitter.

Those thoughts are quieter now, packaged away and well-schooled behind his mask, but they linger all week, an idea slowly forming in the back of his mind, and he can't help but wonder. If he dragged it from the shadows and faced it head-on. If he used it, embraced it, publicly, proudly. If he stood in the sun.

What then?

Chapter End Notes

So excited to finally get to share the Midoriya-Shinsou convo. I've been thinking about this scene for years and I'm honestly thrilled with how it turned out.

See you all soon!

The Threat

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The first two weeks are calm in the kind of way that cannot possibly last.

Shouta keeps a close eye on the tabloids, and can pinpoint down to the minute that news breaks of Hitoshi's return to UA. The fallout is predictably ugly, but expected, and though he burns with resentment at the news desk tirades and outlandish opinion pieces over the following days, he bites his tongue - works his anger out silently, on punching bags and late nights spent ruthlessly grading 1-A's homework. Haru and Hitoshi certainly don't need his input - they'll have seen it all. Or better yet, they won't.

For the most part, Nedzu does a good job of assuaging concerns and redirecting blame, mostly by virtue of giving so many damn press conferences that the media is too busy wading through his useless barrage of quotes to pursue Hitoshi any deeper.

Toshinori delivers his promised segments as well - touring the prefecture to appear in a handful of well-received talk show segments, touting transparency and responsibility and second chances. "The work of a true Hero extends to civil duties far beyond the more glamorous and publicized elements of combat and rescue operations," he says, in one such appearance. "We must also look to the future, towards rehabilitation and reintegration, the likes of which we are now seeing in real-time with cases like Shinsou Hitoshi."

Of course, there are skeptics. A few of the students, in particular, prove harder to convince. Shouta weathers multiple afterhours visits from Yayorouzu, Ashido, and Jirou, among others, who feel the need to make their concerns known about the threat Hitoshi presents. He listens without judgement, and does his best to talk them down. He has no doubt that they'll make him proud in the long run, but they've each got to take their own path there. They're only kids, after all, and they've been shaped by their past. A past, which unfortunately, contains no shortage of negative interactions with villain-kind. They're still nursing the wounds of Hagakure's betrayal, and don't want to risk opening their arms to another who might do the same.

Shouta knows Hitoshi has already concocted his own plans for reintegrating with the others, and doesn't think that he factors into them in any large part. He doesn't want to overstep, or correct for something that need not be corrected.

The other students haven't been making it easy though. It's not just 1-A, either. Even third and fourth-years have been confronting Hitoshi in the halls between lessons, though thankfully nothing's devolved to violence. Shouta and the other teachers are keeping close tabs on him, in case that changes, but for now, he's choosing to trust Hitoshi's judgement. If he doesn't ask for help, Shouta won't impose it.

It doesn't stop the guilt, or the anger, or the feeling he could be—*should* be—doing more. But that's his burden to bear. In class, he makes a point to treat Hitoshi like he would any other student, making no exceptions and paying him no special mind.

This proves most challenging in 1-A's Hero training. Hitoshi's already at a disadvantage without a combative quirk, not to mention having missed an entire semester of instruction. Worse still is his reluctance to use his quirk since the injury. It's not just a damaged larynx holding him back. A mental block, more likely - shame or fear or some trauma-fueled combination of the two.

Yet Shouta can't bring himself to force the issue. Instead, he bides his time, and avoids combat altogether. The first week, 1-A's training consists of theory and navigation exercises. Nothing that can't be done on campus grounds, and nothing that involves combat.

The next week is more of the same. He runs a climbing drill Monday, an exercise that simulates scaling a building after intense structural damage - the platforms all flimsy ply-wood, the handholds and footholds deceptively loose, the building itself tilted on an axis. It forces the heavy hitters like Bakugou and Tokoyami to maneuver with greater delicacy, and results in top performances from Ochako, Ojio, and Sero. Others with more destructive quirks like Ashio and Kaminari are forced to refrain from using them at all, and come in dead last, tied with Hitoshi, who barely makes it to the top at all, winded and pale.

On Tuesday, Shouta runs them through a stealth exercise. On Wednesday, a search-and-rescue. On Thursday, more climbing.

By Friday, he's running low on ideas, 1-A biting at the chomp and worse still, growing suspicious. He can read it in the lines of their

face—the raised eyebrows and questioning glances—and knows Hitoshi can too. Their time is up.

That afternoon, he gathers the students in the multi-purpose gym, the center of the floor cleared but for a single crash mat. He explains the exercise - one-on-one, hand-to-hand, anything goes. The goal is to get the opponent to step off the mat. It's nothing they haven't done a hundred times.

He runs a few warm-up drills, demonstrating different holds and dodges, feeling out the shape of each stance, letting Hitoshi find his place in the crowd, until at last even he has to admit that he's stalling.

He lets a few others go first, so Hitoshi can get an idea of what's expected - Tokoyami against Kaminari, then Jirou against Ojiro. The others gather around to watch, cheering and goading their classmates on.

He calls it as soon as there's an obvious winner, or after more than five minutes without one. No one gets hurt. He won't let them.

He plays it safe. When the time comes, he puts Hitoshi in the ring with Ochako. She's tough enough not to baby him, but won't take it too far.

Hitoshi is utterly expressionless as he steps onto the mat. His chest rises and falls in practiced measures, his arms loose at his sides, fists lightly curled. He might as well be standing for roll call. The poise is too perfect, too calculated. It sends a cold spike of unease through him.

The other students have gone still, their shouts silenced. Hitoshi and Ochako eye one another. Shouta counts down the fight.

She makes the first move, lunging in for a quick swipe. Hitoshi twists from the grasp in a practiced dodge, and she dips, going for his legs instead. He kicks out, and she drops back to avoid meeting his foot with her jaw. The second move is less smooth than the first - a panicked reaction rather than a precise maneuver.

Ochako straightens. Hitoshi's breath rattles through him. He still hasn't said a word.

Ochako makes a feint, and Hitoshi stumbles back with a wounded, frightened noise.

Shouta and Ochako lock up in tandem. His stomach plummets.

Hitoshi's eyes flit over the sea of his peers—sail across Shouta without seeing him—then back to Ochako. His lips move at last, but it's soft, barely a whisper. "Sorry, sorry, I don't think I—" He cuts off, arms wrapping around his stomach. "Can we take a break?"

Shouta lurches forward, arms raised. "Alright, back up."

Ochako's already scurrying back. "Of course, yeah, that's totally—"

Hitoshi's voice rings clear. "Stop."

Ochako freezes.

"Surrender."

Her face goes slack. She steps off the mat without a word.

Shouta freezes, uncomprehending, one foot on the mat and the rest of his body miles away.

"What the hell?" comes a voice, somewhere behind him. "That didn't count, did it?"

Did it?

Someone shakes Ochako by the shoulders. She blinks awake, glances at her feet, and says, "Oh."

Hitoshi straightens, shoulders drawn back and arms loose at his sides. There's no trace of the panic that had crippled him seconds ago - the facade has drained away.

Yes. That's all it was. A facade. An act. Shouta can see that now, plainly. But it's as though his body refuses to accept it. His chest aches, his hands partly outstretched as if poised to catch. He stares at Hitoshi, heart hammering, each inhale a sharp stab of betrayal. "That wasn't—" he stammers. "You can't—"

Something in Hitoshi's gaze darkens. His shoulders tighten, a nearly imperceptible hunch, as he shrinks in on himself. The worst part - he doesn't even look surprised.

It's all the reminder Shouta needs. Of where they are, and of who's watching.

He nods once. Unsticks his tongue from the roof of his mouth and forces out, "Good strategy." He turns to the rest of the class, and recovers with slightly more eloquence. "You should all take notes. Shinsou assessed what he knew about his opponent's personality and successfully used that against her. And Ochako—" He finds her in the crowd, holds the gaze, and *means* it when he says, "You did the right thing."

Her cheeks are warm with embarrassment, but she nods, and the sight soothes something brittle within him.

It's tempered somewhat by the others. He doesn't need to look long. He can feel their stares like a physical weight, the uneasy and incredulous, the downright furious. Hitoshi's is just as heavy on his back - his judgement better hidden, but no kinder. He saw Shouta slip.

He can't think about that right now. The other students are still watching him, awaiting his verdict, and probably doubting his sanity more by the second. Shouta casts about for a distraction, and finds one easily.

"Moving on," he says. "Next up, Midoriya versus Bakugou."

When the bell rings, signaling the end of his first official combat training, Hitoshi is somewhat amazed to still be alive.

The wonder is short-lived. He drifts to the locker rooms behind the rest of 1-A, mouth dry and skin tingling with adrenaline.

Inside, it reeks of sweat and smoke, Bakugou's fists still smouldering. The air is heavy now that the excitement of combat has drained away, and the tension bears down like a weight on his chest - 1-A's wary stares, newly reminded of the ugly, insidious, and precise threat he presents. No one utters a word.

It's a visceral reminder of that first time he met the League, back at the motel. He remembers walking down the stairs to the bar room like prey into hungry jaws. Remembers how their stares had raked across him, as though at any moment one of them might have leapt across the room, talons raised, for the crime of daring to step foot into their home, into their territory.

He's braced for that same reaction now, and stifles a flinch when Iida's steps in front of him instead - his broad shoulders a solid barrier. Midoriya appears at his side, gives a nudge and a smile.

Relief stings at his eyes. He keeps them low as he changes, quickly, quietly.

They join up with the girls afterward. Ochako, who by all measures, should be the most enraged of all by his deception, grins ruefully at his approach, pitches her voice low and says, "You know that won't work on me next time, right?"

His throat goes tight. For the second time in as many minutes, he thinks he might cry. He sucks down a shuddering breath. "I'm sure I'll think of something else."

Ochako's smile goes soft. If she hears his voice shake, she's kind enough not to show it.

The trek across campus is long enough to gather the jagged edges of himself back together. Hitoshi arrives at 1-A sure-footed, breath even—or at least, controlled enough to fake it—right up until Aizawa stills him with a hand on his shoulder. "Shinsou, a word."

His heart lurches. The others filter into the classroom and the door glides shut with a silent hiss.

Then, it's just the two of them, standing in the hallway, looking at each other, saying nothing. Hitoshi doesn't twitch or blink or breathe - nothing, until Aizawa decides whatever this interaction is going to become.

"Your quirk?"

The question could be anything. An accusation. A reprimand. Aizawa doesn't let either colour his voice, but Hitoshi can imagine it just as well.

He gives a half shrug, hoping his silence will draw more from him. He's rewarded for his efforts with narrowed eyes.

"You knew it would work."

There it is. The same startled realization Aizawa wore in the gym - a dawning comprehension, disappointment swift on its heels.

Something that's half pride and half shame tangles in his chest.

He didn't know he was going to use his quirk. Not really. Not until Ochako made that first swipe, not until the first flutter of panic had seized him, not until a little voice had broken through the rising wave of terror, gasping to compartmentalize.

And it worked. And he *won*.

And yet.

And yet he's standing here, Aizawa's disappointment and 1-A's disgust heavy like a gavel set to fall. He feels sick. Guilty. Like he got away with something he shouldn't have. Like Aizawa's *right* to be looking at him like that. 1-A's judgement he could take, but this is different. The bone-deep *hurt* of it steals his breath.

Hitoshi doesn't let an ounce of it show. "I didn't cheat. You said anything goes."

Aizawa stares at him, a knot of frustration in his brow, as though Hitoshi's a puzzle he can't work out. "I'm not—" he starts. Stops. Works his jaw. "I'm not *mad*, Hitoshi. Is that what you think?"

Hitoshi says nothing.

"It was a good strategy," Aizawa continues. And then, voice strained, "It worked on me too."

Everything in Hitoshi's body screams that he's lying, but he can find nothing in Aizawa's face to confirm it. He feels distinctly off-balance, uncertain, senses distorted but still screaming on high alert. But he saw Aizawa hesitate in the gym - he *knows* he did.

There's more Aizawa wants to say, but he doesn't get the chance. His phone buzzes in his pocket, followed by two quick chirps. He bites back a curse and slips it out. Whatever he sees on the screen makes his expression harden. He glances back to Hitoshi, and his eyes are steel.

"We're not done talking about this. Okay?"

Hitoshi glances at the phone, gut churning. But Aizawa is waiting for an answer. He forces a stiff nod.

Aizawa's jaw works silently, clearly displeased, but whatever his internal struggle, 1-A will always win. He blows out a long breath, tears open the classroom door, and ushers Hitoshi through.

He knows something's wrong the second his feet cross the threshold. The air is strangling and razor sharp. Several students are out of their seats, clustered together, heads bent over their own phones. The screens are all lit up with the same image - news footage, some sort of livestream.

Midoriya starts up. "Sensei!"

Aizawa lifts a hand. "I know. Seats, please."

The instruction goes unheard. Students trade worried glances, voices fast and low, passing phones from hand to hand, craning their necks over each other's shoulders, all to see more angles of the same video - cracked pavement, a smoking car.

Hitoshi's blood turns to ice. "What's going on?" he hears himself say, and doesn't realize his legs have locked up until he feels Aizawa firmly guide him through the rest of the doorway.

Ochako materializes at this side, and drags him to where the others have gathered around Todoroki's phone. Hitoshi goes numbly, eyes already locked on the screen, where unsteady footage pans over a gridlocked street strewn with rubble and abandoned cars, civilians fleeing in all directions. A police van lies on its side, singed and half-crushed, its wheels still spinning. A banner of text scrolls beneath *Live: League of Villains attacks downtown Musutafu*.

There are more people at his side now. Voices, and hands. Aizawa's, maybe. The ice in his veins grows jagged, a rabid thing with teeth. He jerks away. He doesn't want to be touched.

Aizawa's voice, loud. "Hitoshi."

He tears his gaze from the wreckage, finds the steady point of Aizawa's stare, and holds it like a plea. He doesn't know what he's asking for.

"This is the safest place for you right now."

He swallows, manages a nod, even as fire rages in his peripheral vision. Shattered glass, emergency lights now flickering out, swallowed in the swirling black fog of Kurogiri's warpgate.

“My mom?” The question may or may not be steady. Impossible to tell, with the thunder of his pulse.

“Already on it. Pros are on the way to her location.”

Hitoshi nods again, and doesn't say another word. He doesn't trust himself to.

There's nothing he can do but watch, his friends gathered close with eyes hard on the screen, more serious than he's ever seen them. Reality blurs into one single, terrible moment, nervous murmurs and furious exclamations washing over him like white noise, breath tight in his chest.

Backup arrives - armoured trucks and Pros alike, but they're rebuffed as portals erupt and the League flocks in, forming a barrier between the approaching reinforcements and the van, still a smoking wreck. Compress, Magne, Spinner, the red-eyed blur of Shigaraki. Hitoshi's eyes flits between them, the shaky footage, desperate to see some sign of Hagakure, desperate not to.

A figure that can only be Dabi drops behind the others, a fiery halo that cuts through the smoke as he stalks towards the wreckage of the police van. He tears the crumpled door off its hinges in a shower of sparks and melted metal, then plunges a flame-covered fist within.

Todoroki's screen jolts with a barely stifled flinch.

The footage cuts to a new angle - a news helicopter circling above, zooming in as one of the Pros finally makes a lucky break, cutting through the League's defensive line. It's a figure he only vaguely recognizes - Best Jeanist, a deft blur of blue, streaking around the wreckage to shoot a thread around Kurogiri's neck.

Hitoshi watches in stunned disbelief, his own throat burning with the memory of closing around it, as the thread pulls taut and Kurogiri staggers, his portals flickering, his hands clawing at his neck. It can't be that easy.

Best Jeanist adjusts his stance, flicks out another thread—this time aiming for Kurogiri's legs—but stumbles, misses, the second shot falling short, and it's all the leverage Kurogiri needs to sever the first. He rises, furious and gasping, before black fog erupts, choking the screen.

It's over as quickly as it began. The fog clears, and the League is nowhere to be found, whisked off to safety and leaving only sirens and

impact craters, civilians crawling from the rubble and choking on the smoke.

Time stutters and skips. Voices trickle back in. All around him, video feeds flicker out to be replaced with social media and chat forums. The media circus, fat on fresh blood. It's a learned instinct - 1-A laps it up hungrily.

Hitoshi feels sick. He rises, a step outside himself, and hears his voice mutter something about needing the restroom. It may not even be a lie. He thinks he might throw up.

He doesn't, barely. Instead, he comes back to himself with cold water cupped in hand, his head hanging low over the sink, damp hair clinging to his eyes. He breathes raggedly, and straightens the crooked bend of his spine. Water drips down the collar of his shirt, cutting lines through the tight, numb feeling that strangles his skin.

Black fog lingers at the corners of his vision. The scent of smoke, the taste of blood, the hot, dry blast of Dabi's fire, as familiar as it is terrifying. Somewhere behind the fear sits a horrible, twisted knot of longing. He pats his face dry with effort, knuckles kneading into his eyes.

The door creaks open behind him. Hitoshi startles up and meets a mismatched gaze in the mirror.

Todoroki's mouth is an unhappy slant, his brow furrowed. Every inch of his body screams how much he doesn't want to be here.

But when he speaks, it's the last thing Hitoshi expects.

"You okay?"

They're the first words Todoroki's ever initiated with him directly, and with none of the others here to moderate. Hitoshi turns, wary, but careful not to let it show. There are a scant few paces between them, and he's already backed into the corner, defenseless. Todoroki doesn't *seem* hostile, but with the League's attack still fresh in mind—a stark and terrible reminder of what he once was—Hitoshi can't help but brace for the worst.

Then again. He looks Todoroki over, remembers his flinch, his unsteady hand. "Yeah," he says at last. "Are you?"

For a moment, Todoroki looks caught. His gaze drops, weight shifting

to his back foot, like he's about to turn and bolt for the door. But he swallows it down, and says, "The one who calls himself Dabi - did you know him?"

Hitoshi blinks, takes a split second to recalculate. "Not as well as some of the others," he admits. "He kept to himself."

Todoroki nods, as though expecting this, eyes trained on some point over Hitoshi's shoulder, distant and troubled. "Midoriya told me about this... *campaign* you're running for Hagakure," he says haltingly. There's a hint of something ugly to the words, a thinly-veiled accusation. "What makes you think she even wants it?"

Now it's Hitoshi's turn to feel caught - mind spinning, gauging his options, the added complication of playing for an audience who already knows the twist is coming. Even Midoriya didn't address it like this, blunt and head-on. He gave Hitoshi room to defend himself with pretty words and hopeful sentiments.

He takes a long breath, keeps his face open. "Nothing. But if we only meet our enemies with violence and hatred, then of course they're going to respond in kind. I'd like to give her another option." He thinks for a moment, adds, "And if she doesn't take it, then at least I can say that I've tried."

Todoroki frowns, seeking something beneath the words. He still won't meet Hitoshi's eye. "Some of them have done horrible things. Some of them don't deserve redemption."

"Maybe, but that's not my decision to make."

"Isn't it?" His voice takes a venomous edge. "Isn't that what heroes do?"

Hitoshi flattens his voice into something perfectly neutral, not a hint of judgement or disdain. As honest as he can allow himself to be. "I refuse to be the kind of hero who damns someone to a life without redemption. There's nothing heroic about that to me."

Todoroki meets his gaze at last. He searches Hitoshi's face for only a moment, then jerks away, something like shame in the motion. Whatever's there—whatever ugly, tangled past swims behind those eyes—is more distant than Hitoshi's, not quite as angry as Hagakure's, but there's something deeply, horribly familiar in it.

His heart lurches in recognition. "Is there something—"

“No,” Todoroki says sharply. The lines of his body have pulled taut, hands twitching at his sides, and Hitoshi knows, *knows*, with every instinct screaming within him, that he’s right.

He closes his eyes. Breathes. God. He’s so *tired* of this.

“Okay,” he says softly, and nothing more.

When he opens his eyes, Todoroki’s watching him warily, as if expecting him to push. But the silence stretches, promising sincerity, and after a moment, a fraction of the tension bleeds from his shoulders. A somber understanding takes its place. He looks away, embarrassed. “Thank you.”

Hitoshi nods, the victory a bittersweet prize for the knowledge it’s unearthed. A sympathetic ear, an olive branch born of a burden neither of them should have ever had to shoulder. He breathes through the pain and the ugly unfairness of it all.

He thinks of the League, wherever they are now. He remembers the relief after a mission gone well, remembers the celebrations, the renewed sense of purpose and belonging, and how it eased that unfairness, soothed that pain, lifted that burden. An addictive sense of belonging, hidden away in whatever dark hideout they’ve carved for themselves while the world reels in their wake.

He can picture them there, and wonders if in the quiet moments between the laughter and drinking, Hagakure ever thinks of the friends she left behind. He looks at Todoroki, at himself, and wonders if she has any idea how many of them share that burden, how many of them know that pain and unfairness as intimately as she does. If she has any idea that even here, even now, even after everything, she’s not alone in it. She never has been.

Chapter End Notes

This is one of those chapters that I edited for so long that it got to the point where all I could see was the ugliness. Even though I know, objectively, it has some great stuff in it. The combat scene with Ochako and Hitoshi, for example, is one that has been sitting with me for years. Shockingly though, it was quickly got supplanted by the Todoroki conversation, which was a much later addition to the draft, and yet ended up being one of my favourite moments. I’m ultimately so pleased with how that one turned out.

Only 3 more chapters????!!!! :o AAAAAA!! I’m yellin & screamin!!

Changed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Between the cramped, clandestine tutoring sessions of Jōshubi, and the frantic, mid-heist exchanges of Golden Heights, the kitchen table is hardly the weirdest place Shouta and Hitoshi have met to exchange notes.

The League's attack is only hours behind them, the villains themselves still at large and the casualty tolls still coming in, to say nothing of the media newstorm that's erupted in its wake. The press was on Hitoshi like a shark on blood, prowling outside the gates of 1-A within minutes of the attack, waiting to catch him on his way home.

Shouta didn't give them the chance. He accompanied Hitoshi home via a back exit, circumventing the streets altogether by way of the skies. If Hitoshi had any opinion of the protection detail, he kept it to himself, as usual. Considering what they'd just witnessed, and the awkward tension lingering between them since combat training, Shouta didn't have the courage to press, and planned to make his retreat immediately after seeing Hitoshi to the front door.

Except that once Haru saw him there, she dragged him inside in a way that brokered no questions, like she'd been expecting his arrival all along, and now it's an hour later and the sun is half-set and there's something incredible cooking in the kitchen. Hitoshi sits beside him at the table, head bent over his maths homework, and despite everything behind them and everything still ahead, *somehow*, the air is warm and familiar and safe.

Shouta scarcely dares to breathe, terrified to break the spell.

Going home means worrying. It means turning on the news. It means answering Tsukauchi's steadily-increasing amount of missed calls. It means dealing with the fallout, cobbling together some sorry excuse for a plan, recovering from his mitsakes, and bracing for whatever one's he's sure to make next. It means not being *here*. And Shouta doesn't know if he's ready for that yet.

So, he sits. And breathes in tiny, motionless increments. And stretches this moment just a little longer.

He's spent more hours than he'll ever admit watching the shuttered blinds of the Shinsous' fourth story apartment from various hidden perches across the street, but he's never stepped a foot inside until now. It's small, but comfortable - the kitchen crowded but well-stocked, the table worn and scratched from years of use, the walls adorned with an entire childhood of photos, weaving the tale of a Hitoshi he never knew. The nearest one displays a gap-toothed smile, hair wet and eyes scrunched up in joy. A beach, somewhere sunny. A family vacation, maybe. He's 6, maybe 7 years old. *A loaded gun*, Haru had said, what feels like years ago.

"Sensei?"

Shouta jolts back to the present, realizes the Hitoshi of the *here and now* has asked him something. His pencil has lowered, the sheet of math equations slid across the table to rest in front of Shouta, waiting for approval.

Shouta feels like an idiot.

He let Hitoshi down today. Not only let him down, but proved him *right*. Every horrible stereotype and unwarranted suspicion his quirk has wrought him - for a moment, Shouta had nearly believed them.

"Sensei?"

Shouta stares at the page, seeing nothing.

Hitoshi's strategy against Ochako frightened him, at first. But then, when he realized it was only an act, it *angered* him.

It angered him that Hitoshi would lie, that he would use something like *that*. Worse still, that he'd had perfect control of his quirk all the while. That he'd already overcome his mental block and hadn't bothered to tell Shouta. That he'd hid it, kept it a secret, only to drop the act as soon as Shouta's guard was down, like some twisted, personal betrayal.

As if it had *anything* to do with him.

After everything he's promised Hitoshi, his words have proven hollow. Hitoshi should be furious with him. Hell, maybe he is. Shouta would hardly know, with how well he disguises his emotions, and Hitoshi would never admit it. He'd be well within his rights to never trust Shouta with a single inner thought again, after today.

He tears his gaze from the page, pretense abandoned. His throat is tight. He forces the words out past it. "I'm sorry."

Hitoshi is the picture of innocence. He glances to the page, back to Shouta. "About what?"

"Today."

Hitoshi levels him a long, blank look, as if to say, *Which part?*

"During training today, I should have—" There are a hundred *I should have's*, a thousand more regrets. They'd be here all night, if he were to make a list. "I should have had your back," he settles with.

There's no visible reaction. Just those guarded eyes, and the horrible, creeping sensation that he's lost something irreplaceable. He knows what comes next - the split-second pause when Hitoshi gauges his opponent, weighs his options, and summons to life whatever ruse it is they want of him.

But it doesn't come.

Instead, Hitoshi sighs, short and clipped - a single burst of frustration, mouth twisted with bitter resignation. He rubs at his eyes, and they come away bloodshot and dull. There's something profoundly weary in the sight.

Shouta's heart aches, braced for the condemnation. But that doesn't come either. After a long moment, Hitoshi only straightens, frowns down at the page still sitting untouched in front of Shouta, and tilts his head, as if this new angle has revealed something to him. He drags it back across the table, and begins to erase the last answer. Without lifting his gaze, he says, "You got there."

It's not an accusation, not the one he deserves. But it's an admission - a confirmation. Hitoshi saw him falter.

There's no sense hiding it. No sense pretending it didn't happen. "I should have been there from the beginning," Shouta says. There's no excuse for it. He let his emotions get in the way of seeing the ruse for what it was - a brilliant strategy, expertly executed. There was nothing wrong or unfair about it. Hitoshi's quirk only works when he gets the response, by any means necessary. And he did exactly that.

A better teacher would have seen it immediately. But Shouta had been angry. Angry and selfish and scared.

Hitoshi flicks the eraser shavings off the page, inscrutable. "You were angry because you fell for the trick," he says. "And afterwards, because you thought I had lied to you about not using my quirk."

Shouta watches him scribble an equation on the page. "I was," he admits.

Hitoshi writes for another moment, then finally lifts his gaze. "I did."

Shouta stares back. "What?"

"I did lie." The words are a cold, sharp blade, a razor's edge aimed for Shouta's throat. "I used it. I tried to, anyway. Once on Fukumen Asano, and once on Midoriya Izuku."

He absorbs this information as evenly as possible. A dozen questions race to mind, but none find purchase on his tongue. Instead, voice even, he says, "Okay." And then, after a moment, "Thank you for telling me."

Hitoshi eyes, long and steady, as if the calm, fixed-point of his stare could draw the lie from Shouta's tongue.

Shouta holds the gaze, unwavering, and muffles his surprise when Hitoshi breaks it only a moment later. Between one moment and the next, he can see it - the crack in the mask, the flicker of doubt swimming beneath.

"I should have told you," Hitoshi says softly. "I'm sorry."

Shouta shakes his head - not at the apology, but the brittle edge of self-reproach within it. "You didn't owe me that."

Hitoshi's mouth twists, unconvinced.

"You didn't tell me for a reason," Shouta continues. "Whatever I did to deserve that, whatever I did to make you doubt me, that's my fault."

Hitoshi blows out a sharp breath. "You didn't do *anything*," he says quietly, frustration hard in his voice. "I was just... scared."

It strikes with a startling realization. He can't remember the last time he saw Hitoshi scared, saw him wear it openly, the jagged edges of it unmasked. The bank, maybe, back in December.

The cold marble floors beneath his knees, the terrified shrieks and gunshots that ricocheted in the air above his head. The League raging

at his back and Hitoshi trembling before him and the entire world crashing down around their heads. Amidst all that chaos, Shouta made a promise. They were the words he chose then, and he chooses them now, with the same bone-deep conviction. "I trust you."

He sees the exact moment Hitoshi decides to believe him. There's a slight hitch in his chest, an unsteady breath as he lifts his burning gaze to Shouta's once more, and the stark and naked bravery of it glows like embers in his chest. The heat crawls up his throat and stings at his eyes, robbing him of words.

By the time he gathers himself again, Hitoshi has turned his attention back to the page. His pencil flies through the last equation, pausing now and then while his gaze flickers about in silent calculation. He scrawls down the last few digits, and after a long moment of silence, offers, "You speak sharply to cover feelings of guilt and stress."

Shouta chokes back a laugh. "I– I suppose I do."

Hitoshi shrugs, lays the pencil down, and finally slides the page back across the table. "I forgive you."

From the kitchen, there's the clatter of cutlery as Haru doles three servings onto their plates. The air is rich with spice. At some point in the last minute, she's begun to hum beneath her breath.

The League is still out there. Hagakure is still out there.

There's an entire block of the city littered with rubble from today's attack. A dozen news outlets are covering the story as they speak, pumping the gorey details through every TV screen and smartphone in the nation. Tomorrow, they'll be back to covering Hitoshi. The entire world is watching, waiting, *hoping* for him to fail, because it's what they've been taught to do to people like him. They're waiting for the lie, the trick, the betrayal, waiting for him to stumble, to fail, to prove them right. A loaded gun, poised to go off.

The four walls around them are a flimsy defense, the shuttered blinds nothing but a makeshift security blanket, a temporary shelter from the storm beyond.

Shouta glances to the wall once more, finding that old picture of Hitoshi. The gap-toothed smile and youthful innocence are long gone, but the kid's still here. He's older now, and scarred. Changed, in a thousand ways, ways they couldn't possibly have known then. But somehow, despite all that, he's *here*. Still Hitoshi. Still able to say, *I*

forgive you.

And Shouta believes him. He made a promise to, after all.

He looks down at the page finally, scanning the calculation scrawled across the bottom. The faint outline of Hitoshi's first uncertain attempt still sits beneath, but the script above it is fluid and sure. Hitoshi doesn't need Shouta to tell him, but he does anyway, heart impossibly full. "Well done, kid."

Chapter End Notes

Shorter chapter this week, but the next two are shall be chunky.
See you then!

Compassionate

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The tranquility doesn't last. Because of course it doesn't.

The weekend has Shouta playing damage control, catching up on his slew of missed calls and culminating in a hasty meeting with Nedzu and Tsukauchi, the former of whom arrives looking unimpressed, and the latter downright furious.

The damage from the League's recent attack is still being assessed, the casualty tolls still trickling in, and chief among them is a single fatality.

"Their target was the police van," Tsukauchi cuts straight to it, face grim. "The driver's still in the ICU, but it was the passenger they were after. Yasujima Koitarou."

He was being moved to the courthouse jail in preparation for next week's trial - something the public shouldn't even have known about. Without their star witness, the prosecution has been left spinning their wheels.

Shouta stares, blindsided. "A joke," he chokes out. "This is a fucking joke."

"Yeah, well," Tsukauchi scoffs. "I'm not laughing."

"Who the fuck was working on his transfer?"

"Few enough to narrow it down. Too many to be certain." Tsukauchi's lips press together in thought, a dark glint in his eye that Shouta recognizes at once. "The leak on Shinsou's return came from inside the PD too. I thought at first it could be an honest mistake, someone running their mouth, someone who just wasn't careful enough But now—"

"You think there's a mole?"

"The League had one in UA," Nedzu says. "Who's to say they wouldn't try their luck elsewhere?" He gives a shrug, weary but unfazed, as if he's made peace with the reality of operating within a neverending

clusterfuck.

Shouta digs his hands into his eyes, beating back the steadily mounting thrum of a headache. It would work too, with Tsukauchi's quirk out of commission, no longer able to tell with a single word whether his colleagues were being truthful. "Why would the League be trying to protect Chisaki? Their mutual business ventures were hardly fruitful."

"Maybe they intend to remedy that. Chisaki would present a valuable ally to the League, especially if he were in their debt." Nedzu's voice takes a hard edge. "Regardless, he's evidently a well-connected man, with a wider reach than we know." He turns to Tsukauchi. "We'll need to be more careful. Not that I doubt your abilities, detective, nor the hard work that you and your department have done for us, but we should restrict the police presence at Chisaki's trial to as few as possible."

Shouta shakes his head. "We'll need a perimeter to keep out the press." Anywhere Hitoshi goes, they're sure to follow.

"Perimeter's one thing," Tsukauchi concedes. "But Nedzu's right. I don't want any of them in the building. I don't want any of them near Chisaki."

Nedzu nods. "I can call in some personal favours to get Pros there instead. My own staff, if need be. I would also suggest installing a watch on Eri in the meantime."

"Agreed," Tsukauchi says. "What about the Shinsou?"

Their eyes both swivel to Shouta. He gives them a dry look. If there's ever a time the Shinsou *aren't* in danger, he'll be sure to mention it. "Yeah, yeah," he says. "I'm on it."

Hitoshi's weekend is a welcome respite - a long sleep in and a lazy morning spent sprawled in bed, listening to the patter of rain against the window. Mom's gone by the time he fights his way free of the blankets, an armed escort accompanying her on a tour of prefecture, viewing new apartments. She texts him pictures of the ones she likes, and Hitoshi pretends to offer input, even knowing he won't be around

much longer to make a home of them. The thought fills his chest with something strange, a soft, quiet sorrow, growing heavier as the hour lengthens.

Outside the window, the rain clouds have thinned, and faint rays of sun struggle out from behind them. He takes an ill-advised midday run, hoping to clear his head. The pavement is wet, the scent of earth and spring sharp in the air. He fills his lungs desperately.

He still anticipates Hagakure around every corner, still searches for her down every alley, but his imaginings come to naught, as always. Life goes on.

He thinks about the trial instead, silently rehearsing the lines of his witness statement, exactly as Tsukauchi directed - which details to emphasize and which to obfuscate. It's only a week away now, but despite everything—the scrutiny his performance is sure to garner, and the weight of the outcome resting upon its shoulders—he finds, to little surprise, he isn't nervous.

He's already plunged from so many terrifying heights, with nothing but a web of convoluted lies to slow the fall. Really, what's one more leap of faith? This time, at least, he isn't alone. He's got help, for once. Guidance. An entire team on his side, their arms extended to catch the fall.

On Monday, school feels much the same. Ochako finds him at the gates as usual, and the smile he summons for her is natural, now. The weekend's rain has banished the last of the snow, and spring has brought colour to UA's front lawns - pollen sweetens the air, and buds of green cling to the trees.

The teachers take it easy on him all week. They must know about the trial. Hitoshi drifts from class to class without being called on, and leaves each day with a backpack suspiciously devoid of homework.

He doesn't disparage the good luck, but isn't surprised when it abruptly ends either, a cluster of second-years cornering him outside of the cafeteria on Wednesday.

Hitoshi keeps his head down, shoulders tight as he tries to dodge past them, but they circle in close, their leader stalking forward with narrowed eyes glowing in her face. He feels the impact of her quirk at once, thunder eclipsing his thoughts, the sharp press of an intrusion somewhere in the depths of his mind.

“Let’s see what you’re really hiding, huh?” she sneers.

“Oh my god, give it a *rest*.” Ochako’s voice cuts through the crowd. Her fingers around his arm are a lifeline, tearing him from the haze of the quirk as swiftly as she drags him down the hall, muttering, “Some people have nothing better to do, honestly.”

Her flat, unimpressed tone steals the last of his terror. He bumps his shoulder against hers, offers a heartfelt, “Thanks.”

If there’s any tension leftover from last week’s combat training or the League’s attack, she and the others hide it well. The only glaring reminder comes in the form of Midoriya, who has compiled all the news footage of the attack he could hunt down, which he reviews obsessively over lunch, his phone propped up on the table while he scrawls illegible notes into the margins of an overstuffed notebook.

Ochako shoots Hitoshi an apologetic smile, and deftly steers the conversation away. They have a fitness test coming up next week, complete with a grueling ten kilometer endurance component. A collective groan goes up around the table at Ochako’s reminder.

Todoroki elbows Iida. “Guess you’ll be taking first place, eh?”

Iida flushes, but has the good sense not to boast. “I’m sure you’ll all do fine. Endurance is an important trait for any hero, regardless of quirk.”

“But I hate long distance.” Ochako heaves a dramatic sigh and spawls against the table. “I always feel like I’m gonna puke by the end.”

Tsuyu pats her back. “This proves it,” she says gravely. “Aizawa’s a sadist.”

When the laughter dies down, even Hitoshi is grinning.

Todoroki catches his eye. “You run as well, don’t you, Shinsou?”

He’s been talking to him more, ever since their encounter last week. Since then, in their quieter moments, Hitoshi has divulged a few more details about Dabi - his solitude, but also his kindness. His control with his quirk, his reluctance to use it in sparring. Todoroki won’t say it, but Hitoshi knows he treasures each word, and in response, has gifted him a quiet, steadfast camaraderie. The attention still feels novel.

“I do, yeah. Five kilometres, every day, if I can.” He’ll have to train up for ten, but he’s not worried.

Iida perks up. “I’d be happy to join, if you’re ever looking for company.”

Hitoshi hesitates, caught in the split-second calculation of smoothing over the rejection without causing offence.

Across the table, Midoriya rewinds the video to the start, and says without lifting his gaze, “Shinsou likes to run alone.”

He nods, seizing the out. “Yeah, it’s easier for me to get in the zone, you know?”

“I’ll train with you, Iida,” Ochako says, face still buried in the table. “But you gotta promise to go easy on me.”

The conversation moves on from there, an easy ebb and flow, and Hitoshi relaxes into it. The chatter of his friends and endless rush of noise from the cafeteria settles over him, no longer the daunting, stifling weight it once was. He gazes out over the sea of faces, and finds a familiar one gazing back.

Aizawa stands sentinel across the room, back to the door, eyes steady over the throng of students, ever-watchful. He gives Hitoshi a slight nod.

Hitoshi grins, and swings his legs over the bench without a second thought. He’s there in a few short strides.

Aizawa straightens at his approach, alarm clear on his face. Hitoshi only smiles wider.

“Your class needs more endurance practice,” he says without preamble. “They all *hate* long distance.”

Aizawa huffs a laugh, and inclines his head with a knowing smile. “Thanks for the insider tip.”

The rest of the week passes easily. On Friday, Hitoshi lingers behind the final bell, bids his friends farewell as they take off for the dorms,

and begins the quiet trek back towards homeroom. He's been waiting for his private lessons with Aizawa all week.

The route is a familiar one, all vaulted ceilings and gleaming floors, designed to dazzle, to never dull or scuff, even under the weight of a thousand frenzied footsteps. In the silence, it feels less daunting. The afternoon sun streams through the hall, and it's just that. A hallway. A building, with foundations erected on little more than hopes and dreams. Hitoshi's is just one more face, one more story moving through it.

He passes the old 1-C classroom, then further along to the hall where he first met Compress and Skinner last semester. He remembers the heart-pounding terror as he led them away from All Might's hiding place, how he clung so tight to his mask that he nearly cut himself on the brittle edges of it, terrified at any moment the guise would shatter. He remembers his disbelief, his *elation*, when it held strong. How Kurogiri found him then, the shadow of his body like a shield against the world, his hand extended, *a declaration of sympathy*. Hitoshi gazes through the window over that same field now, awash in the pale green of spring, the light wrapped around it like a solid thing.

His reminiscing is cut short by the familiar patter of light footsteps ahead. Hitoshi slows his pace expectantly, and a moment later, Nedzu rounds the corner. The timing is anything but coincidental; he doesn't pretend to be surprised.

Neither does Nedzu. He fixes Hitoshi with a bright, eager look. "Shinsou, may we speak in my office for a moment?"

He does him the honour of phrasing it as a question, at least, but Hitoshi hears the summons for what it is. He wonders for a moment if Aizawa will worry when he's late, but then, Nedzu's nothing if not thorough. He's sure that's been taken care of too.

He nods, and Nedzu leads the way.

Inside his office, all is as it always was, and—Hitoshi increasingly begins to suspect—as it ever will be. Alphabetically-ordered files and colour-coordinated pens - a perfect mirage of intention and control.

The only difference are the blinds - lifted, for once. Not even Nedzu is immune to the charm of spring, it seems. The window is partially open, and cool air spills in, ruffling one of those perfect stacks of paper. A thin crack of sunlight sneaks through, stretching an ever hopeful ray across the carpet, catching on a pattern Hitoshi's never

noticed before now.

Nedzu takes his seat and Hitoshi does the same, setting the stage for a duet they've done a dozen times before. He once found Nedzu difficult to read, unable to find anything human in his animal features, but in this moment, his cunning gaze is sharp and entirely familiar. He smiles, not quite in his usual, scheming way, but not in a terribly kind way either. Hitoshi resigns himself to a speech, and preps the arsenal of his mask, ready to shift into whatever Nedzu demands.

"I will endeavour to be brief," Nedzu begins. "As I know you are a busy young man."

Hitoshi doubts it. But he sets his jaw, giving full attention.

"I firstly want to express to you how proud I am, of all of your accomplishments, but most especially, of your decision to return to UA. I know that it has not been an easy one."

He says it with the air of a man who either knows exactly why Hitoshi did it, or wants him to think that he does. Hitoshi suspects the former, but wishes for the latter. Just once, it would be nice to have outsmarted him.

"Thank you," he says, and offers nothing else.

"Shinsou, I have not been completely honest with you, for the vast majority of our working relationship. I think you've come to realize this already, and I think it likely that you resent me somewhat because of it."

Hitoshi tilts his head. It's not the words that surprise him, only the admission of them. "Among other reasons."

"All valid grievances, I'm sure." Nedzu's eyes crinkle, amused by the insolence. "I want you to know that I was never dishonest with you out of suspicion or distrust, but simply due to the fact that I didn't believe honesty was conducive to my goals at the time. But all the same, I would like to be honest with you *now*, because you have certainly earned that much."

He's intrigued despite himself. He lounges back against the chair, casual, and waves a hand in allowance.

Nedzu eyes the gesture with an inscrutable smile, and leans back himself. "When I initially chose to approach you with the mission to

lure out the UA traitor, it was neither your quirk nor even the negative light in which society views it that earned you my attention,” he says. “It was the simple fact that I knew that I could take advantage of your willingness to try. *That*, I believe, is your greatest asset. And I am very happy to see that it has not abandoned you, despite the trauma you have sustained.”

It’s— *odd*, to hear Nedzu admit these things out loud. He supposes it comes as no real surprise - only the timing of it nags at him. Why is he saying this? And why now? And what does he want in return? If this alleged display of honesty is meant to mend the broken trust between them, he’s sorely missed the mark.

Still, Hitoshi mulls it over, playing the words back through his mind, trying to hear them from Nedzu’s ears. His *willingness to try*. His ability to be manipulated, moulded. Of course. Did Nedzu always know he would end up like this, irrevocably altered by the people he was meant to hurt, the organization he was meant to destroy?

It’s as if Nedzu has heard the thought. He splays his hand across the desk, and leans forward. “I am intrigued by the way that your time with the League has changed you, and I am very eager to nurture that change both academically and professionally,” he says. “Shinsou, I see in you that which reminds me of myself, only you have a much stronger adherence to— Well, let’s call it what it is. *Morality*. Where once I would have thought that a weakness, I am now only fascinated by it.”

Hitoshi gazes at him neutrally, even as his mind whirs away. So Nedzu sees him as a pet project, after all. An ongoing experiment, a specimen to study - the adaptation of an organism to its environment. It’s as if he’s supposed to take it as a compliment. Nedzu certainly seems to mean it as one.

“You have a lot of undiscovered potential, and, I sense, some very interesting ideas brewing in that head of yours. Defeating villainkind is, by its very nature, an endless battle, and that is why I am so devoted to it - because of the challenge it presents. But there is more than one way to go about it. For generations, we have tried All Might’s way and the way of heroes like him. More recently, we have tried my way. I am beginning to see that perhaps now it is time to try yours.”

“Which is?”

Nedzu fixes him with a knowing gaze. “Compassion, would be one

word for it.”

Ah. Nedzu *does* know, then. Why he’s come back. What he’s hoping to achieve. Who he’s hoping to achieve it for.

Damn. Hitoshi really thought he’d outsmarted him, for a minute.

He tilts his head towards the breeze, a faint smile on his lips. He can’t help it. He laughs.

He remembers one of his first conversations with Nedzu, all those months ago. Remembers leaning in close, enraptured, as Nedzu spoke, describing what it was like when his quick first developed. Remembers his breath frozen in his chest, as if to make a single sound would have banished that precious moment, that faint glimpse into the depths of the man seated before him.

I wasn’t yet legally recognized as a higher-thinking creature, Nedzu said then. Just a rat in a cage, begging for dignity and respect from a world that had shown him none of it, a world without an ounce of compassion.

Why, then, would he have had it for anyone else? Nedzu was born into a human’s world, a world of heroes and villains, where his only advantage was to be smarter, more cunning, more *ruthless*, than anyone had ever been to him.

Until now. Now, something’s changed.

It’s as if Nedzu is offering him an extension of the mission - a chance to take it from the top, to rewrite the script, to try again, this time with feeling. With compassion.

You’re in no way obligated to accept, he said, so long ago. But of course, he knew Hitoshi would accept it then, and he knows it now. It’s not a question of whether he will, but a realization that he already has.

Nedzu watches him process all this without a hint of anticipation, as controlled as ever. He’s probably already thought through every version of this conversation a hundred times. Hitoshi doubts there’s anything he could say to *truly* surprise him, so instead, he stands, offers a deep and mostly sincere bow, and says, "You do have a tell, actually. You talk too much."

Nedzu’s smile meets his eyes, pure and unguarded delight. “That I do, Shinsou. That I do.”

Hitoshi doesn't have to say that he accepts. They both already know.

Chapter End Notes

The final chapter is going to be stupidly long, so bear with me. It will probably be slightly longer wait as she undergoes her final edits.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for seeing this thing through with me. I eagerly anticipate seeing you all at the end!
<3

Hero

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Musutafu Courthouse is a daunting, two-story building of glass and stone. The grounds are surrounded by pristine gardens, already showing the first signs of life after a long winter. Two smaller administrative wings span the length of the lot, converging on a large central courtroom with a lavish, domed ceiling. In a few hours, that courtroom will be thrumming with nerves and sweat, the anticipation of months' worth of ruthless and grueling investigative work. But for now, it sits quiet and still in the early morning hush. A soft, watery dawn has crept over the city, shadows made long by the towering skyscrapers that surround them.

It's on one of those skyscrapers that Shouta has found his perch, crouched on a narrow ledge, shoulders tight as he peers down on the scene below. He traces the perimeter for what must be the twentieth time - all manicured lawns and flagstone walkways, glistening with morning frost. There was a light snowfall last night, probably the last of the season. All traces will be gone by mid-day, the footsteps of the overnight custodians and security guards lost to time.

He traces the perimeter again, lingering on those footsteps like he could wring the deception out of them. He eyes the windows, the front steps, the curb where the police barricade will form, a shield for those within. He can already picture the circus of scrutiny, the sidewalks where the press and paparazzi and protesters will swarm, frothing at the mouth for a shot of the action.

The public carnival of Pro Hero life has always been his least favourite aspect. Bright costumes and flashy moves, bragging for fans and posing for cameras. None of it ever felt genuine to him, and privately, he used to think that somehow made him *better*, that it made him even *more* of a hero. He didn't need the praise or the attention. In fact, he detested it.

Because hiding from praise meant hiding from critique too, meant shielding himself not only from the limelight, but from *any* light, for fear of what it might illuminate.

Hitoshi changed that. Hitoshi showed him how much strength it really

takes to stand in the light and bear the force of its unclouded judgement. He's going to do it again in that courtroom, in just a few hours - and probably again and again every day thereafter, for the rest of his life.

Shouta told Haru once that it never gets easier, that you never *really* stop being scared. You just learn not to show it. In the span of a few months, Hitoshi has mastered that talent. Despite everything—the accusations flung at him and the blame willingly shouldered—he's never faltered. He meets it head-on, perfectly curated, his fear and doubt expertly hidden. Shouta has every confidence that one day, with enough time and persistence, it will work. One day, he *will* change the way the world sees him. The way they see people like him. The way they see villains.

But he'd like to think that he's gotten better at seeing him too. Really seeing him - the person beneath the mask. And the depth of what he sees there, of his courage and conviction, amazes him every time.

It's enough to ease his fears too. Enough that he finally tears his gaze from the courthouse, tilts his head back and heaves a deep sigh. Already, the chill in the air has begun to lift. His lungs fill with sweetness, the promise of spring. The weariness melts from his bones, braced instead with anticipation. Just a few more hours. It's nearly over.

His phone chirps. He fishes it from his pocket, glances down to see Haru's name flash across the screen, and quickly slides the message open.

It's a picture. A close-up of the kitchen counter, where two identical mugs have been placed side by side. *You coming? Coffee's getting cold.*

Shouta grins, and his next breath curls through the air with a hint of laughter.

A moment later, another text. *Balcony door's unlocked.*

Shouta pockets his phone and unleashes his weapon, turns his grin towards Saitama, and sails through the sky.

It's almost over.

Might as well get started.

It's no surprise that the sidewalks are brimming with crowds, a swarm of bodies that surge to life as they approach the courthouse. The car slows as the crowds lurch closer, a crushing wave barely held back by the row of kevlar-vested police lining the street. Cameras flash and voices cry in protest.

Hitoshi keeps his gaze low, purposely unfocused, until the swarm becomes a single, featureless blur. Background noise. He flexes his fingers against the fabric of the seat, hidden from view of the windows, and takes some small comfort in the way Aizawa does the same, face fixed in a scowl which he makes no effort to hide.

The police wave them through, guiding mom as she steers them into an underground parking garage. The doors rattle along their tracks and close with a deafening clang, echoing in the dark and sudden silence as she cuts the engine.

They clamber out of the car without a word between them. Hitoshi adjusts his cuffs as he stands, smoothing out the suit jacket that mom had materialized last night out of the back of some closet. She's dressed just as nice, in the only pair of heels he's ever seen her wear.

Even Aizawa's made an effort. He's dressed in a suit instead of his usual costume, hair pulled back. He hides his discomfort well enough, but Hitoshi knows where to look for it. The tired lines of his face are more pronounced, a hint of gray in the stubble of his chin. His usual goggles don't hang around his neck, but the weapon, of course, never leaves it.

It's a flimsy defense for what awaits them, but Hitoshi looks them both over and finds their shoulders set and heads tall. He draws in a deep breath and does the same.

It's the first day of the trial, with both the prosecution and defense teams set to deliver their opening statements today, an overly formal affair that promises to drag out. As the key witness and SME respectively, he and mom were advised to be present for the full trial, though neither are scheduled to take the stand until tomorrow at the earliest.

They take the stairs up to the main floor, where they're greeted by vaulted ceilings and polished marble floors, a wide entrance hall that intersects the main foyer and leads to the central courtroom. The

courtroom doors are propped open, where stoney-faced staff in suits and ties scurry about in all directions, paying them little mind. Aizawa steers them to a quieter section of the building, a narrow hall where the ceilings are lower, more functional than grandiose. The walls are lined with wooden benches and set with various doors, mostly leading to administrative rooms. They find an empty bench to settle on while Aizawa calls Tsukauchi.

It's a few minutes before a breathless Tsukauchi arrives. Like them, he's formally dressed, and looks no happier for the occasion. He locks eyes with Aizawa. "Chisaki's in holding. Just arrived."

"Who's with him?" Aizawa asks.

Tsukauchi rattles off a list of names - underground heroes Hitoshi's never heard of. "Police are on the perimeter," he continues. "None in the building, and none of them have anything to do with Chisaki's movement."

This information makes Hitoshi narrow his eyes, some unspoken point of tension materializing in the air. "Are we expecting problems?"

Aizawa shrugs in a *don't worry about it* motion. "Always."

It's an easy deflection—true, if purposefully vague—but he lets it slide, for now. He pins his gaze on Tsukauchi instead. "Where's Eri?"

"Daycare room." Tsukauchi juts his chin towards a set of closed, unassuming doors at the far end of the hall. "She's got a nurse with her. We won't make them sit in on the opening arguments. Better to keep Eri calm before she has to take the stands."

"Can I see her?"

Tsukauchi pauses, lips pressed thin. "Probably best not to, kid. This is already a big change of scenery. We don't want to overwhelm her, you know?"

Something settles in the pit of his stomach, a tangled knot of worry and rage. He can only imagine how scared she must be, with what she's being asked to do. Who she's going to have to face, while she does it.

Mom slides an arm around his shoulder, tugging him close. He waits for the press of her quirk on his mind, but there's nothing there, just the quiet comfort of her presence. The knot loosens by degrees.

Tsukauchi's walkie-talkie gives a shrill beep, and a crackly voice comes through the other end. "Hey, boss, the crowds are getting pretty rowdy out there. You need us to give your boys a hand?"

Tsukauchi's mouth twitches. He tears the walkie-talkie off his belt. "I'm coming, I'm coming," he gripes. He checks his watch and turns to Aizawa. "Jury should be arriving in fifteen. You good here?"

Aizawa nods, something grim in his face. "Watch your back."

Tsukauchi claps him on the shoulder, the two sharing some brief, silent communication, expressions as severe as if they were about to march off to war. "You too."

"Tsukauchi, wait," Hitoshi says abruptly. He rockets to his feet, and dips into a low bow. "Thank you for everything."

Tsukauchi looks caught, surprise wide in his face. After a moment, a fond smile breaks over it instead. "Yeah, of course, kid. Good luck in there. We're all rooting for you."

The courtroom is wide and austere, windowless yet glaringly bright, with ornate marble pillars lining the walls and framing the central podium from which the judge glares down over the room. The furniture is all polished wood, muted and gray. There's a small gallery near the main entrance for witnesses, and a juror's bench along the eastern wall, behind which stands the juror's private entrance. A third door stands along the western wall, small and unassuming.

They take their seats in the gallery, among a sparse gathering of other figures, while the prosecution team settles in for their opening arguments. The jury's bench is empty; they'll be the last to enter. The only other vacant seat is Chisaki's.

They aren't made to wait long. Moments after they've sat, there's a flurry of movement as the door on the western wall swings open.

Out steps a familiar figure, flanked by two guards, his arms twisted together in elaborate anti-quirk cuffs. Chisaki's cold gaze flits across the courtroom, drinking it in a matter of seconds, before calmly settling straight ahead. His steps are sure and easy, as if the weight of

his imprisonment and the heavy cuffs on his arms mean nothing. He's dressed in a wrinkled beige prison uniform, and there's a dullness to his hair and skin, but it doesn't reflect in his eyes - bright and alert. His mask is even better than Hitoshi's. That slight narrowing at the corners of his lips could be anything - a twinge of discomfort, a frown of remorse. Even a smile.

He settles into the chair next to his defense team, facing forward with his back to Hitoshi. The sight alone has dread crawling up his throat, skin tight with an electric sense of danger that only heightens when the juror's entrance opens and a procession of somber-faced figures begin to file in and take their seats.

At least, the judge calls the room to order, the fall of the gavel impossibly loud in the sudden hush. Hitoshi tears his gaze from Chisaki and straightens in his seat. The air is thick with anticipation.

He tries to pay attention, at first - gauging the jurors' reactions as the prosecution lawyer's sharp, demanding voice rings out. But as the minutes tick by, his focus flickers back to Chisaki. His posture hasn't wavered an inch since. His shoulders don't tighten, his head doesn't turn, he doesn't so much as twitch. He's perfectly serene.

It's driving Hitoshi fucking crazy.

"The defendant's crimes vary in definition, but are each shocking and abhorrent in their own right," the lawyer says gravely, to Chisaki's unerring calm. "Throughout this trial, you will see irrefutable evidence and hear first person testimonies attesting to these crimes. You will learn that the defendant has committed repeated and continuous instances of child abuse, neglect, and medical malpractice, including physical violence, confinement, starvation, administering electrical shocks and experimental injections, and performing invasive surgical procedures upon a child between the ages of three to six years old."

The words spear through his chest. Hitoshi's fingers tighten in his lap, blood thrumming at the memory of Eri's terror when they first met, the way she cowered and flinched from even the slightest touch. All the while, Chisaki is as tranquil as a frozen lake, his frigid surface deceptively still. Hitoshi has the distinct impression of ice cracking beneath his feet.

Aizawa shifts on the bench beside him, hand coming to rest over Hitoshi's. Without taking his eyes off the room, he murmurs, "You're

good.”

Hitoshi squeezes back, solid and here and now. The feeling lingers long after the touch has retracted. He breathes, compartmentalizes, and makes it through the morning.

They're dismissed for a break after a few hours. First, the jurors are sequestered, then Chisaki's guards reappear and march him out the way he came, presumably towards a holding cell. Only then are they allowed to trickle into the hall.

They make their way to the same bench as earlier, a ways off from the courtroom and main foyer. Mom breaks off to find the washroom, leaving Hitoshi and Aizawa to wait alone. Out here, the sounds of protest are less muffled. The crowds outside have only gotten denser since this morning. Hitoshi spares a second to feel bad for Tsukauchi, and steers well clear of the windows.

Aizawa sits, head tipped against the wall, radiating a calm that's surely more for Hitoshi's benefit than his own. It's a wasted effort. Hitoshi paces, fingers twitching and aching for a smoke. His skin itches at not having Chisaki in sight. He feels like Aizawa, suddenly - desperate to keep eyes on the threat.

Aizawa twitches as Hitoshi makes his fifth circuit of the hall, but he bites his tongue, letting him work through his restlessness without comment. The silence is broken a moment later as his phone chirps in his pocket. He pulls it free and glances at the screen. His face instantly creases into a frown.

Hitoshi stops dead. “What?”

Aizawa waves him down and places the phone to his ear. “Yes?”

The voice on the other line is faint, but the rambling, rapid-fire pace of it is unmistakable. Aizawa's frown deepens. He cuts in with a sharp, “What do you need?”

A pause. Hitoshi leans in.

Aizawa gives a long, strangled sigh and holds out the phone. His voice is utterly flat. “It's for you.”

Hitoshi's stares like it's a lit fuse. After a moment, he gingerly accepts it. “Hello?”

“Shinsou!” Midoriya’s breathless voice crackles through the line, loud enough to make him flinch.

“Uh,” is all he can think to say.

“She was there! During the attack last week. Hagakure was there.”

The words are like a blast of cold wind, stealing the breath from his lungs. His heart stutters, freezes, plummets to the soles of his feet and shoots out of the top of his head. “What?”

“I finally found the right angle. The news helicopter didn’t catch it, but there was a civilian in one of the cars filming on their phone. I found the clip and–”

“Where?” he demands. “Where *exactly* was she?”

“She was next to Kurogiri when he was fending off Best Jeanist. At first, I couldn’t tell if he just missed on his second attack, but I figured he couldn’t have, not from *that* close, you know? There must have been something blocking his angle, or *someone*.” Midoriya’s voice drops, rapid and low. “Shinsou, I can’t be sure, but... I don’t know if Hagakure put herself between them to *save* Kurogiri or– well, it’s impossible to say, really, without being able to see her. But it didn’t look like she deflected Best Jeanist’s shot. It almost looked like she– I don’t know, caught it? It looked like she *let it* hit her.”

The room lurches. Hitoshi’s knees go weak, dropping him onto the bench with a loud thud. Aizawa grasps his shoulder, looking like he simultaneously wants to rip the phone from his hands and shake him senseless. “You’re right.”

Midoriya stammers. “I don’t know, it’s hard to–”

“No,” Hitoshi says. “You’re right. I know you are.”

There’s a beat of silence. “That’s what it looked like, at least,” Midoriya concedes. “And I just– well. I thought you should know. You know, for your– for everything you’re doing.”

She was there. Never center stage, never where anyone would think to look. Always working from the shadows, biding her time, striking only when least expected. Watching her allies’ backs, whether to protect or betray them. But always watching, always there. It’s the same way she saved Ochako, the same way she saved *him*, and now the same way she saved Kurogiri. Trading herself for him, letting herself be caught.

Letting herself come back. Letting herself come *home* .

“Thank you,” he breathes.

“Of course,” Midorya says. “And good luck, Shinsou. With everything.”

He hands the phone back to Aizawa, dazed, his chest glowing with something so bright it borders on painful.

“Hitoshi,” Aizawa says sharply.

It’s only then he feels the enormous smile splitting his face. He bites it back, barely. “Yeah?”

“Everything okay?”

Hitoshi nods. Means it, for once. “Yeah.”

Aizawa appears unconvinced. He opens his mouth to say as much, then falters to a stop, eyes flickering over Hitoshi’s shoulder. Hitoshi follows the gaze on instinct, and sees mom at the end of the hall. Her brow is furrowed. She glances behind her, as if unsure what she’s just seen. She turns back after a moment, spots them on the bench and starts towards them full tilt, arms swinging.

“Hey!” she calls.

They both straighten in tandem. “What’s wrong?” Aizawa says.

She skids to a stop in front of them, voice rushing out. “Tsukauchi said there aren’t supposed to be any police in the building, right?”

Aizawa steadies her. His face is thunderous. “No.”

“Then why did I just see one heading towards the courtroom?”

The words spear him with a cold lance of dread - the immediate understanding that something’s gone horribly wrong. Shouta’s weapon is furlled in hand between one heartbeat and the next.

“Stay here,” he barks, and breaks into a sprint. He’s down the hall in

an instant, rounding the corner and ruthlessly plowing through the crowd. It's a matter of seconds before he spots the courtroom door.

There's a uniformed figure there, dark-haired with a stocky build, one hand on the door's handle and another cradling a phone to his ear. He spots Shouta in the same moment, eyes flying wide. He wrenches open the doors and darts through, shouting into the phone, "Now! Now!"

Shouta gives chase, sliding into the courtroom in time to see the officer already half-way across it. He activates his quirk, but the man's only running, angled for the door along the western wall. The one that leads to Chisaki's holding cell.

He slackens his weapon, readying a throw, when the lights suddenly flicker, the room flooding with shadow. A swirling black portal yawns open in the middle of the floor.

Shouta skids to a stop. Something crashes into him from behind, knocking him a step forward. He steadies, throws out a hand and catches Hitoshi by pure instinct.

For a split-second, they both stare at the horror unfolding before them.

Then Shouta shoves him back towards the door. "Get back!"

Hitoshi staggers. His face is pale with revulsion, limbs locked, shoulders pulled high around his neck and arms curled in front of his body in a rigid mimicry of self-defense. Shouta swallows a curse, certain he'll have to abandon the fight in favour of getting him to safety, but as fast it came, the panic drains away. Hitoshi's gaze meets his, desperate with clarity.

"Eri," he whispers.

He realizes it at once. The mole in the PD, the attack on Yasujima Koitarou, and now this. They're not just protecting Chisaki. They're *rescuing* him.

Shouta freezes. Cold fog billows at his back. He can't be everywhere at once.

But he doesn't have to be.

"Find her," he says. "Get her somewhere safe."

Hitoshi nods, jaw set with grim determination, his stance sure-footed and light and achingly familiar. Shouta whirls back to face the threat.

His quirk ignites. He drops into that same stance, low and loose, and locks his burning gaze onto the figure emerging from the shadows.

Hitoshi bursts out of the courtroom with fog at his back and wrapped like a vice around his heart. There are gasps and shouts of fear from the crowd, the closest of them already scurrying back. For those who need more of a hint, he provides one, screaming, “Run! Get back! Everyone get outside!”

The dramatics do the trick; people flee for the exit. Hitoshi pushes past them and towards the hall, where he careens into the only figure running *towards* him - mom, her heels kicked off, socked feet sliding on the marble.

He grabs her by the elbow and swings her around. Arm in arm, they race back the way they came. Mom’s terror is palpable. All she can do is repeat his name in a rapid litany of panic.

He can’t spare the breath to answer, doesn’t know what he’d say anyway. They make it to the intersection of the hall, and Hitoshi grinds to a halt. The bench where he and Aizawa sat not a minute ago has vanished. The floor beneath it has dropped into a black portal, now slowly closing as two figures emerge. Hitoshi has a nanosecond to take in the figures of Compress and Spinner before he jerks mom around the corner and out of sight. Breathless, they lean against the wall, hearts racing.

He sweeps the area before them, quiet now save for the distant sounds of panic from the foyer, and spots the stairwell on the opposite wall. He gives mom a shove towards it, whispering, “Get to the car. Call Tsukauchi.”

He doesn’t wait for an answer. He creeps to the edge of the wall, craning his neck. Mom grabs his wrist, jerking him back.

He spins to face her, breaks her hold and pins her instead. His fingers dig into her arms, his voice low and urgent. “Mom, *please*. ”

Her eyes are bright with tears, fierce with love. She searches his face desperately, as if trying to commit every inch of it to memory. At last, she nods.

He squeezes her arms one last time before releasing her, and watches as she backs away, holding his stare as long as she can before finally turning for the stairs. He watches her go, then quiets his heaving chest, scarcely daring to breathe as he leans back around the corner.

Compress and Spinner have moved further down the hall, steps light, heads swiveling. They move in practiced formation to the nearest set of doors. Compress wrenches them open and Spinner sweeps into the room, sword held aloft. He emerges a moment later, shaking his head. Compress doesn't waste a second - he spins on his heel and moves for the next set of doors.

The daycare is at the end of the hall, just two doors away.

His whole body is trembling, wild with adrenaline, sweat pooling down his spine, but his mind is cold and razor-sharp, sizing his opponents. He shrugs off his suit jacket, balls it around his right hand, sucks down a final breath, and darts around the corner.

Spinner's sword is loose at his side as he turns to follow Compress. Hitoshi closes the distance - ten feet, five, two, before Spinner's ears twitch. He glances back.

Hitoshi wraps his fist around the blade of Spinner's sword, the metal slicing through the fabric of his jacket as he squeezes tight. In a single motion, he jerks it back, tearing it from Spinner's unsuspecting grasp.

Spinner whirls to face him, a furious shout on his lips, but chokes it back as his eyes widen in recognition. Hitoshi doesn't give him the chance for anything else; he rears back and slams his foot into Spinner's stomach, knocking him backwards through the open doorway. Whatever happens next, he has no fucking clue - in the same breath, he slams the doors closed and jams Spinner's sword between the handles, barring them shut.

He whirls to face his second opponent.

Compress is already closing in.

Hitoshi skitters *back back back* as the first swings come. His fist comes up, still balled in his sleeve, but doesn't strike back.

His skin is on fire, mind and body narrowed to a single knife-point of terror. The last time Compress touched him, he was strung up and tortured for four days.

Compress is wearing his mask, expression indecipherable. He settles into a low, predatorial crouch. He doesn't speak, and Hitoshi can't find the breath to try.

He conjures the warehouse. Toga's laughter at his back, Kurogiri's watchful eye somewhere above.

He and Compress circle each other. He falls into the memory, mirroring before he knows it - step by step, in perfect tandem. He knows this feeling, knows this body.

His next breath comes deep and even.

He dodges Compress' first swipe, then the next. The moves are calculated and tight, easy to predict. No risks. No flashy moves. He dodges another, then drops low and makes a feint.

Compress recoils like a viper.

Hitoshi advances, emboldened. Compress steps back again. Not scared, maybe. But- wary.

"Come on, come on," he breathes. Then, louder, bolstered. "Come on. You don't wanna do this. I know you."

Nothing, of course, in his voice or his face, but Hitoshi can feel it - the flicker of indignation. "What, you think I don't know you? You think I don't know you, *Atsuhiro*?" he taunts. "But it's just Compress to your friends, right?"

Compress lunges. Hitoshi bats the arm back, gets in a kick, pulls his foot back in time to avoid the fingers closing around his ankle. He skitters back, and Compress seizes the momentum, advancing again. Another swipe grazes Hitoshi's face. He staggers in his retreat.

Just a word. Any word.

He shakes out the bloody shirt wrapped around his fist, holds it loose, like a pathetic imitation of Aizawa's weapon. Compress isn't deterred; he moves in again. Hitoshi whips the shirt and Compress bats it out of the air easily. The fabric folds in on his touch, goes glassy and smooth.

Hitoshi catches the marble mid-air and whips it straight for Compress' throat.

He staggers back, chokes a word that might be, "Fuck."

His jaws snap closed. It's enough. Hitoshi gasps, "Stop!"

The marble clatters to the floor.

Compress goes rigid.

Hitoshi stares, heart racing, half-caught in disbelief. But Compress is a perfect statue. The hall is silent but for the spear of Hitoshi's breath and the muffled swearing and pounding of Spinner against the doors.

He points a shaky finger. "Keep that closed."

Compress moves on autopilot, striding calmly for the doors. He braces his shoulder against them, feet planted.

Hitoshi watches him another moment, just to be sure. His hands curl to fists. The bite of Spinner's blade has left his fingers dripping blood, but the pain is inconsequential, swallowed in the welcomed rush of adrenaline. The fight isn't over. He pivots and sprints for the daycare.

It's a small, dim room, furnished with low tables and padded chairs. The lights are off, the room illuminated only in the flickering blue and red of emergency lights from beyond the window.

Eri stands on her tiptoes, tiny fingers grasping the windowsill as she peers between the slats of the blinds. There's a young woman next to her, who must be her nurse, hand hovering over Eri's shoulder as if to coax her away. They both whirl to face him as the doors crash open. The nurse gasps, eyes wide with terror.

Hitoshi starts into the room before his mind catches up to him. He knows how this must look - chaos raging outside, a former villain bursting in through the door.

He lurches to a halt, mouth working uselessly before he manages, "We have to go."

The nurse's eyes dart across his face, to the window, to Eri. She takes a halting step in front of her, shielding her with her body.

Hitoshi splays his hands - still dripping blood, god *fucking* damnit. The nurse tenses.

“Please,” he says, desperation choking the word. “Please, I’m not gonna hurt you.”

A flicker of uncertainty, but before she can move, Eri darts out from behind her legs. “Eri!” she shouts, but it’s too late. Eri’s across the room in an instant, throwing herself at Hitoshi without enough force to stagger him. Her arms tighten around his waist. “There are bad guys outside!”

Hitoshi grasps her shoulder. “I– I know, but it’s okay. I’ve– I’ve got you,” he manages, voice shaking from how hard he’s trying to keep it calm. He glances back to the nurse, more urgently. “It isn’t safe here. Please.”

She nods at last, face pale, and rushes to untangle Eri from around his legs. “Okay, Eri, come on. Let him move, honey,” she soothes. She lifts Eri into her arms.

Hitoshi steadies them, then throws a finger to his lips. The nurse nods in understanding, and together, they creep silently back towards the door. The hall is empty except for Compress, silent but for the rattling of the doors - the sound of wood splintering and hinges groaning as Spinner throws his weight against them. It won’t hold forever.

He ushers them past. The nurse is slower than him, with Eri’s weight in her arms. Hitoshi slows, sticking tight to her side, scanning for threats. The main hall has cleared by the time they reach it, the other civilians having either fled or hid. The doors to the courtroom stand open, the sounds of a fight echoing within - a muffled shout, the splintering of wood, the low thud of an impact.

It only takes an instant to decide.

He turns to the nurse. “There’s a stairwell at the end of the hall. Take it down the garage. There’s a woman in a black car parked near the front. Flag her down - you can hide with her.”

Her eyes are filled with fear, but she nods, tightens Eri in her arms, and turns for the stairs. Eri’s eyes are wide over her shoulder, bright with unshed tears. He summons a smile. His blood thrums with conviction. He’ll see her again. He knows it.

He turns back to the fight.

Shigaraki rises out of the darkness like a ghost, eyes blank and cold with a focused fury. He sets them on Shouta, and a faint snarl ticks up at the corner of his mouth.

Shadows drip from the walls and swirl at his feet, cloaking Kurogiri from sight. He sweeps the room, but can do little else without putting his back to Shigaraki, a mistake he doesn't ever plan to make again.

The odds have never been in his favour, against these two. Not with his entire class roster to protect and—if he's being completely honest—not alone now. But he adjusts his stance, undaunted, weapon poised in hand and set to strike.

The darkness presses in; Shigaraki wears it like a cloak. He moves and it sweeps in behind him. Shouta circles, keeping his back to the room and his eyes locked firmly on target - the half-shape of him he can see in the shadows. He flicks his weapon wide and Shigaraki side-steps it with ease; he whips it back and Shigaraki pins it under his boot.

He's not closing the distance. Which means—

Shouta jerks to the side as the floor drops away. He scrambles onto a witness bench, then leaps onto the judge's podium as a portal swallows that too.

He's not the only one who's had the bright idea to start using the furniture; a chair comes flying from nowhere. He ducks and hears it splinter behind him.

He pulls his gaze from Shigaraki, more concerned with the incoming projectiles, and dodges another chair by mere inches. But he sees where it's coming from this time. The fog is densest in one corner of the room. He aims his weapon.

The hot curl of breath is all the warning he gets before Shigaraki's fingers graze the back of his skull. Shouta twists out of the hold and bats him away. He leaps off the podium and twists midair - gets his eyes and weapon around Shigaraki and drags him to the ground.

He rolls onto his feet, and has barely steadied when the floor beneath him vanishes once more. His weapon goes slack as he plummets into freefall.

He barely retracts it in time to fasten it to the edge of the portal and

scrambles desperately back up.

Shigaraki's on his feet again by the time he pulls himself free. The frayed edges of Shouta's weapon are smoking in his curled fists, bits of it scattered to the floor. His chest heaves in fury. "Finish this," he snarls.

A portal tears open inches from Shouta's head, Kurogiri's fist sailing through. Shouta ducks the arm and grabs it instead, twists and *pulls* and hears something crack. Blinding fog erupts across his eyes as Kurogiri cries and jerks away.

Shouta releases him, leaping backwards and into— something, some *one*, warm flesh. Small, soft, living. He recoils, drops low, desperately raking the space. His quirk sparks and flares, roiling within him.

She's here.

He's given no time to decide what to do with the realization - another fist comes flying from nowhere. Shouta dodges again - on the defensive now. Eyes on Shigaraki, on Kurogiri. On Hagakure, where he can only guess her to be.

Shigaraki takes the opportunity to retreat, slowly backing across the room. There isn't a thing Shouta can do about it, with an enemy he can't see and another he can't afford to take his eyes off.

Shigaraki has almost reached the door to Chisaki's cell when a flicker passes over his face. His eyes snap to the door and narrow in hate.

Hitoshi's voice pierces the air. "Aizawa!"

The courtroom is swallowed in shadow, deep and heaving and dark, but when he shouts Aizawa's name, Hitoshi swears he sees them *flicker* .

All eyes snap to him but the ones he knew would stay locked on target. Aizawa spins and launches his weapon across the room, where the shadows are deepest.

He wrenches the fabric taut. With a cry, Kurogiri staggers forward, tangled within it. His glowing eyes are wide and stunned, mask

toppled loose. The fog scatters.

Shigaraki's frenzied eyes snap back to Aizawa. He growls and races towards him.

Aizawa fights him out of the corner of his eye, unrelenting stare locked on target. He bats Shigaraki off with a kick, then clambers up onto the podium, dodging swipes for his ankles. He balances there precariously for a moment before Shigaraki's touch reduces it to dust. He drops feet instead, dragging Kurogiri closer as he does, keeping the restraints taunt and his quirk sharp.

But then, instead of following him, Shigaraki's wild gaze turns to Hitoshi.

Hitoshi is frozen.

It's five quick steps, and a face twisted in fury, and a hand extended like a claw. That single image fills the whole world.

Hitoshi braces his feet, fills his lungs, raises his arms. To block. To try.

A shift of movement. A silent breath shimmers in the air.

Shigaraki trips.

Shigaraki turns for Hitoshi, and Shouta goes blind with panic.

He moves like a puppet on a string, eyes turning after him with no conscious decision to do so, wide with a fear he hasn't felt in years, primal and all-consuming.

Shigaraki lunges, *staggers*, wildly off target. Hitoshi neatly side-steps as he goes sprawling to the floor.

Shouta stares, dumfounded. It's so bizarre, so completely incomprehensible, that for a moment, that's all he can do.

Shouta's weapon goes slack.

His head whips back - the fog has vanished, Kurogiri with it. Mother

fucker.

Voices, then. The thunder of approaching footsteps. The doorway fills, a blur of colour and sound, as a dozen Pros pour into the courtroom. There are several figures he knows at once - Midnight, Snipe, Cementoss. Backup is finally here.

Shigaraki's head snaps up, spittle flying from his lips. Shouta has him pinned in his stare at once. Hitoshi takes several quick steps back, chest heaving, gaze darting everywhere at nowhere.

Shigaraki scrambles to his feet, seething. "You bitch." He swipes through the air, clawing at nothing.

The momentary distraction is all the others need. They fan into the room, surrounding him. Cementoss immediately ripples the earth beneath Shigaraki's feet, causing him to stagger. A series of rapid shots from Snipe has him on the defensive, distracting from the sight of Midnight creeping up over his shoulder, her quirk already pouring from her skin.

"There's another hostile in the prisoner's holding cell," Shouta shouts to the rest of them. He points without lifting his eyes from Shigaraki. "He's dressed as a police officer!"

The others take off at once, but Shouta can't afford to watch them go. Shigaraki has caught sight of Midnight's approach. He whirls on her, fingers outstretched, and Shouta snuffs his quirk. He must feel it; Midnight dodges the first swipe, and he doesn't bother trying for another. His gaze snaps to Shouta, face creased, incandescent with rage.

"Kurogiri!" he spits.

Shouta tenses, daring to tear his gaze free. He scans the room, poised for another attack, but there's none forthcoming. No black fog pouring from the walls, no portals swallowing the floor. No sign of Kurogiri at all.

Shigaraki's surrounded and he knows it. His gaze pinballs desperately across the room. "Kurogiri!"

In the end, without the rest of the League, he's no match at all. He fights wildly, a vicious last stand, but outnumbered and quirkless, can only hold out so long. His breath grows laboured, swings increasingly reckless. At the first stumble, Midnight's on him, hooking an elbow

around his neck as she releases a blast of her quirk.

He thrashes in her grip, hands scrabbling uselessly at the arm around his neck. Midnight grits her teeth and pins him to the floor. Shouta watches to the bitter end, eyes aching, as Shigaraki gasps, twitches, and finally falls still.

Instantly, he swivels to Hitoshi.

Hitoshi hasn't moved, eyes wide and hands outstretched like he needs them for balance. His mask is down, face desperate, scanning – not the fight, but the corners of the room, the empty spaces.

Shouta wants to tear across the room and seize him by the shoulders, wants to pull him tight and shake him senseless. He quiets his racing heart and moves slowly instead, hands open and low, as though coaxing a wild animal.

Hitoshi doesn't look at him, but shakes his head minutely at his approach. "She's here," he breathes.

Shouta sighs. "No, she isn't."

"No, no," Hitoshi says. "She is."

"Not now," Shouta says, more sternly. "Not anymore." And not with this many people around. She was out the doors the moment they opened.

Hitoshi turns to him at last. His devastation is naked. He knows it's true.

Shouta grasps him by the shoulders at last, grip firm and unyielding. The fight is over, but they've still got an audience. He steers Hitoshi back, away from the chaos and sound, and softens his voice. "Are you okay?"

Hitoshi blinks, remembering himself at last. His gaze flits across the scene, looking lost.

"Hitoshi, listen to me," Shouta says. "We'll find her, okay? Just not here."

Hitoshi releases a shaky breath. "Okay."

"Are you hurt?" he presses.

His hands curl to weak fists. There's blood smeared across the palm of his hand, which he stares at as if just seeing. He shakes his head. "I'm—I'm fine."

"Your mom? Eri?"

"Yeah, they're— they're okay too. They hid in the car." His voice regains its strength. "Are you?"

Shouta blinks down at himself. He's unharmed. Alive. Miraculously, so is Hitoshi. All told - it's the best outcome he could have hoped for.

And— Hitoshi was right. Hagakure was here. She saved him. Again.

He doesn't quite know what to think of that yet. The inferno of hatred that once raged within him has quieted. All of his anger has been spent. He's broken through the shores of it and arrived on the dead calm seas of the other side.

It's the perfect betrayal, the eleventh-hour change of heart. She's done it before, and could easily do it again. The bitter, bruised part of him—the part always searching for threats, for shadows and lies and deceit—knows that. But.

But she came. She saved him. And Shouta promised Hitoshi that he'd help her in return. He meant that.

"Yeah," he says. He squeezes Hitoshi's shoulder. "Come on. Let's get the hell out of here."

The weirdest part is, at this point, it's almost normal.

The grounds around the courthouse are flooded with figures, swarms of Pros and police and paramedics, bathed in the red-blue flicker of emergency lights and streaked with the bright yellow lines of police cordons. They sweep the scene, dressing wounds and gathering testimonies, pushing back the crowds of curious onlookers and snapping pictures of the damage. Tsukauchi stands in the center of it all, barking orders left and right.

It seems the grounds saw their fair share of the fight, with members of the League having appeared suddenly in a coordinated attack, facing

off against the police before they were abruptly whisked away by Kurogiri. There are a few civilian injuries to reckon with, though thankfully it seems the League was more focused on distraction than damage, apparently hoping to draw attention away from what was happening inside the building.

Chisaki has been secured by the Pros, the plot to free him thwarted and the officer who helped orchestrate it detained. It's not a figure Shouta recognizes - one of the precinct's newbies, like they'd thought. He knows Tsukauchi feels personally responsible for the mistake, and Shouta doesn't doubt for a second that he'll go to every length to make sure it never happens again. It's a feeling he knows all too well from UA.

The biggest catch of the day, however, is Shigaraki. He's in anti-quirk cuffs and so densely surrounded by Pros that Shouta can barely see him - all eager to be caught in the camera's flash as they march him down the front steps, past the crowd, and into a waiting van. Shouta stands well back, watching them go. There's a burning flash of pride, of *finality*, as the door slams closed, but Shouta doesn't chase it. He's not nearly so naive as to believe it's over. Not yet. Not in the ways that matter.

There's still the rest of the League to contend with, not to mention however many criminals and copycats are sure to swim to the surface in the next few days, scrabbling to fill the villain underworld's new power vacuum. The fight will continue, on smaller scales, in shadowy battlefields and underground arenas all over the world, and persist yet still in wars of legislation and public perception and history. The ravenous press will have its fill, gorge itself on the news of Shigaraki's capture and lavish in the taste of his blood, the way they have Hitoshi's.

What the remainder of the League will turn into without him at the helm, only time will tell. The official story is that they escaped with all their members but one, and only Shouta and Hitoshi know that to be a lie. The world doesn't know of Hagakure's defection, not yet. They've bought her that, for now. After all, she'll never reach out to Hitoshi in front of a crowd.

Things are beginning to quiet down, the ambulances streaming away and reporters dispersing. Shouta melts away with them. His heart races, quickened by unfathomable instinct. The sensation stutters to life and dies in the same breath - his eyes find Hitoshi, leaning against the car. Haru stands on the sidewalk nearby. Her eyes are bright,

cheeks faintly red where she's scrubbed the tears away, but she's poised, face calm, head bent in conversation with Eri and her nurse.

He can feel her quirk radiating from a mile away, a warm, soothing presence embracing his mind. His ribs expand with breath. He welcomes it gratefully as he steps into her orbit.

Eri spots him coming first. Her face is alive with wonder under the effects, dancing in the bright blue of the open sky. She erupts in a smile and streaks over to meet him.

Shoua catches and lifts into a spinning hug. She squeals, delighted, tiny fists curled in his shirt. He remembers the sight, ingrained into his vision when he carried her from her prison months ago, trembling and mute with terror, the used syringes and bloodied bandages burning in the corner of his vision. He tightens his hold.

Eri only grins at him now. "Are the bad guys all gone now?"

Haru's watching with crinkled eyes. Shouta ruffles Eri's hair playfully. "That's right."

"Really?" Eri's eyes shoot wide. She gets incredibly serious then. "Does that mean you'll play with me on the teeter-totter again?"

Shouta chokes on a laugh. "Yes! Yes, soon."

Haru stifles one of her own. "Is that a promise?"

"Of course," Shouta says as he breezily deposits Eri. "Heroes never lie."

Haru rolls her eyes, and the calmness she radiates doesn't so much flicker. He glances her over, assessing for hidden injuries, then meets her gaze and realizes she's doing the same. She smiles, weary but heartfelt, before her eyes flicker pointedly to Hitoshi.

He's standing back from the others, purposely and visibly angled away from the crowds, his shoulders loose and entirely too calm where he leans against the trunk of the car. The cuff of his sleeve is stained with blood, but his hand has been bandaged at some point since Shouta saw it last. His gaze is thousand miles away.

Shouta strolls over, leans next to him, the picture of casual. "Hey. Everything okay?"

“Yeah,” Hitoshi says reflexively.

Shouta gives him a second to think on it, then says, “You sure?”

This time, Hitoshi turns to face him; those familiar eyes dance across his face. Shouta waits for him to find whatever he’s looking for.

“I’m gonna go,” Hitoshi says.

“Okay,” he says slowly. “Where?”

Hitoshi glances away, that same calculating gaze flitting over the scene. The threats, the witnesses, the empty spaces. After a moment, he shrugs. “I think... I think I’m gonna go for a run.”

Shouta nods, unsurprised. Hitoshi’s face is sharp in profile; hard and grim, like it was in the courtroom - distinctly older than Shouta remembers. He asks anyway. “Do you want me there?”

Hitoshi shakes his head. “It’ll only scare her.”

Of course. Shouta gave that very same advice, at the start of it all. Hitoshi has to be alone, for the plan to work. He signed off on that.

“But... afterwards,” Hitoshi continues. “If it goes well, can we come to your place?”

“Yes,” he says quickly, the fervor falling off the word. “Of course.” He’s flooded with half-formed concepts, words of warning, of advice, of *pride*, all tangled in his throat, none more than vaguely accurate to how he feels. He wraps an arm around Hitoshi’s shoulder instead.

Hitoshi folds instantly into the embrace. Shouta pulls him tight, until Hitoshi’s face is nestled in the crook of his shoulder, rests his chin on the top of his head and just *breathes*, for a long moment, eyes closed, chest glowing.

God. This fucking kid.

“Be safe,” he murmurs.

He feels the answering smile against his skin. “Always,” Hitoshi says, and he must really be a hero after all. He lies like the best of them.

Hitoshi runs.

It's a vaguely familiar route, drawn by blind instinct. He hurries away from the crowds, weaving down narrow, winding streets and taking sharp turns at random. He follows the train tracks downtown, towards UA, but splits off before getting too close. He keeps a steady, comfortable pace, easy to follow - even doubling back a few times. He passes Jōshubi, circles Shihori Park, then finally cuts through Saitama and towards the industrial yards.

The sun glides across the western sky, warming the air. The city comes alive beneath it, glowing and golden. The snow has long melted. He leaves no footprints, and knows she won't either.

He keeps his head up, alert but at ease, puts one foot in front of the other and feels the rhythm of his breath burning in his lungs, the taste of something imminent in the air.

He almost doesn't let himself think it. It's too impossible. Too dangerous. But he knows he's right. His blood sings with the thrill. His cheeks ache from biting it back. Every nerve in his body screams it. *Now now now.*

Eventually, he comes to a quiet street, dotted with shrubs and low, quiet houses. He slows to a jog. There's a small park up ahead, empty, private. Trees tower above, branches covered in faint green buds and swaying in the breeze. The wind curls off his sweat-soaked skin. He gasps it down desperately. He suddenly can't seem to catch his breath.

The shadows flicker as the trees bend in the wind, sheats of sunlight dappling through, splayed across the earth like grasping fingers, beckoning him forward. He plants his feet at the edge of the light, head tilted back. His heart is a drum. He wonders for one surreal moment if any of this is real.

He summons a deep breath.

“Hagakure?”

The answering silence is long enough for the fog of his breath to disperse. The trees sway, the shadows dance, the wind sings and sings and sings. Hitoshi doesn't move.

Then, at last, another breath, another heartbeat.

“Hi, Shinsou,” she says quietly.

It vanishes - all of it, the world and the stage and the mask. His eyes flood with hot tears, face beaming open with relief, so dizzying that he nearly staggers.

There are a hundred ways he’s imagined this moment, a thousand versions of it he’s practiced in his mind, but the words desert him instantly. It’s only her name that finds its way onto his tongue.

“Hagakure,” he says. “Thank you.”

His skin prickles; he feels her approach like a shadow with weight. He turns his gaze to hers. “Thank you for what you did today,” he continues. “And— And for everything you did before.”

She falls still once more. Silent. Invisible. His gaze wavers, suddenly uncertain. The severity of the moment bears down, a frantic, suffocating urgency, like she’s an instant from slipping away.

“Come back with me,” he says quickly.

Silence again, long and immovable, giving nothing away. He isn’t sure what to do with it, what to look for, where to reach. He feels himself starting to crack. “Please.”

“You could make me.” Her voice is a cold thing, smooth and featureless. Water over stone, leaving no trace of itself behind.

He jolts to the sound, eyes searching for hers. His fingers twitch. “Hagakure—”

“You already have my response,” she snaps. “Go ahead.” She sounds distant, the way she does when she means something entirely different than what’s come out of her mouth.

Hitoshi shakes his head. “I’m not going to make you do anything.”

He doesn’t let the silence deter him this time. He keeps his gaze steady. He imagines reaching out, imagines his hand finding hers. Imagines the tremor in it—anger, or fear, or some blend of the two—and squeezing tight despite it, so tight that something would snap, and all that horrible agony would come racing off her skin.

“I’m not going to make you do anything,” he repeats. “I’m only going to ask. Come home. Please.”

A shift in the air, a single step. "I don't have a home anymore."

"You *do* ," he says. His voice breaks on the sound. "You do. It's right here, if you want it."

The words are tight with desperation - a visceral recognition, a bone-deep fear, but he breathes through it, and looks, and *looks*, and-

And for an instant, he swears, he can almost see her. A trick of the light, a faint shimmer of breath caught in the air, sun-dappled shadows lengthening as she steps forward once more, the light bending around them as it sinks towards the horizon.

Her voice comes at last, mere inches away.

"I- I don't know what to do. I'm scared."

"I know," he says softly. "I was too. But I can help you, if you'll let me."

He feels his face being scrutinized and doesn't move, confident there's nothing but the truth in it.

"I'm not going back to them," Hagakure says. "To my parents. I won't. I- *I can't* ." There's a slight tremor. An unspoken *please* .

"You don't have to. You can stay with us. With me." His voice wavers before he wrestles it back. His eyes sting, pressure welling in his chest. "I'll be with you every step of the way."

They're so close, every breath feels borrowed. Her focus is heavy, her silence impossibly fragile. Hitoshi moves slowly, terrified to break the spell.

He lifts his hand, palm raised, fingers outstretched. It hovers between them, brushing the edge of the shadows.

The distance between them narrows to that single point - Hitoshi's hand, extended in question, in invitation.

Hagakure reaches back.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, what to say in my final author's note? To be honest, there was a good while when I wasn't sure we'd ever make it this far,

but to my immense pride and satisfaction, here we are! I hope you all had as much fun reading this thing as I did writing it. I look back on komorebi with a mixture of emotions - I am very proud of what I created, although I recognize that there are certainly some areas that could have been improved. Mostly, I am impressed with my own dedication and pleased at how much my writing has improved since beginning this project.

To the commenters and kudo'ers - thank you from the bottom of my heart. Your support and love for this story helped bolster me through the many rough patches and long hiatuses. I genuinely don't think this story would have ever been finished without you. I have come back to these comments many, many times throughout the years when seeking encouragement, and I'm sure I will continue to do so for a long time.

Now, I am going to go take a walk, sleep for ten thousand years, and get started on some new projects! I hope you see you all around!

End Notes

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